

Paving the Path to Graduation: Salient Factors for Successful Transition and
Persistence of Transfer Students at a Four-Year Institution

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ABSTRACT

Representing a larger percentage of the undergraduate population on campus across the U.S, coupled with a predicted decline in the “typical” college-going population of 18-year-olds, transfer students will play an increasingly critical role in the national completion agenda. This study examines the complexity of the transfer student experience as it relates to their transition to a small, private four-year institution and persistence to bachelor’s degree completion. Specifically, the goal of the study is to discover factors that facilitate success from transfer students’ arrival to graduation and determine the applicability of several prominent models of student success and persistence to transfer students’ experiences (Bean, 1980; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1987). 48 transfer students were interviewed shortly after their arrival or after several semesters of enrollment at one four-year university. Using grounded theory for data collection and analysis, the findings suggest that the most salient factors for successful transfer student transition are early and effective preparation, and strong self-advocacy and utilization of faculty and staff resources to help them navigate their new university environment. The findings also suggest that transfer students’ personal motivation and prioritization of education and learning over other obligations foster persistence to degree completion. This study provides a better understanding of the lived experiences of transfer students and evidence that existing models of student success and persistence require revision to consider this prominent undergraduate student population.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Higher education today has a growing population of students who attend multiple institutions as they work to earn their baccalaureate degrees. Transfer students represent students with diverse backgrounds and have a variety of academic, social, financial, and personal reasons for moving from institution to institution. Nearly 60 percent of undergraduates attend more than one institution (Adelman, 2006). The six-year completion rates for students who have transferred are in the 62–67 percent range, whereas for those students who remained at one college throughout their bachelor's degrees, the completion rate was between 54 and 58 percent (Adelman, 2006). While the completion rate for this student population may be higher, it takes them substantially more time to finish. With more time needed to complete their degree, there is a greater likelihood for challenges to arise and interfere with students' progress toward their goals; in this case, the primary goal is an undergraduate degree. For students who began at community colleges, the average completion time is approximately six and one-half years, which is one and one-half years longer than for those who begin at four-year institutions (Snyder, 2003). Time often is lost in academic credits which add to their graduation timeline and greater financial burden to these students.

It appears that this student population could be pivotal in achieving higher national baccalaureate degree completion rates if we, as a nation, committed to get more students to completion in a more timely fashion. If transfer students are more successful in completing college than their native counterparts, why do we know so little about what makes them more successful in finishing their degrees? Why do transfer students encounter what appear to be more barriers to completion and how do these students

overcome those challenges? By examining the transfer student population and factors for success, university administrators and practitioners can discover what it takes to improve college degree completion. With a majority of our undergraduate population categorized as transfer students, colleges and universities need to focus on aspects of the transfer student experience that facilitate success after their initial transfer to a new university, and through graduation.

Four-year institutions often use transfer students to fill the remainder of their incoming classes and budgetary goals. As predictions of declines in high school graduation rates between now and 2020 appear certain, colleges and universities nationally will need to enroll more transfer students to fill spots that typically have been occupied by students going to college immediately after high school (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). Thus, transfer students become critical to the bottom line of many institutions. Due to the increasing number of transfer students in higher education and the emphasis on college completion rates, university officials need a better understanding of what transfer students need to assist them in completing their baccalaureate degrees. More empirical research on what facilitates transfer student success at four-year institutions is necessary for receiving institutions to implement better policies, processes, services and programs for this critical and diverse college student population.

Existing research focuses on students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions. Additionally, the research centers on what community colleges have done to prepare their students for the transition to the four-year experience. In recent years, a perceived increase in responsibility has arisen for four-year institutions to ensure the success of transfer students in orienting, advising, and providing academic support to

improve retention of these students (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Efforts to identify what it takes to retain transfer students have largely been ignored by four-year institutions, while these institutions have channeled significant resources to retention of first-year, native students and other student subpopulations.

Transfer students still face today many of the same issues transfer students faced decades ago: negative attitudes of faculty, staff and students toward transfer students; difficulties through the admission process; challenges encountered during new student programs, credit articulation, registration, academic advising, student financial aid; and trouble adjusting to institutional differences (Sandeem & Goodale, 1976). Loss of previously-earned credits moving from one institution to another is one of the top sources of frustration for transfer students (Laanan, 1996, 2001; Lee, 2001).

Orientation programs and transfer student support services vary greatly by institution. Upon arrival to their new university campuses, transfer students express complex thoughts about their welcome and feelings of inclusion. When transfer students arrive at their new four-year institutions, students often feel they are on their own (P. Bauer & K. Bauer, 1994). Some transfer students feel they have already been through the college experience and need little assistance in navigating a new college campus (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). However, once they have arrived, transfer students often have difficulties finding resources to help them and may need to go to several offices before finding the answer to one question. Not surprisingly, though, Laanan (1996) asserted that these students feel ignored and neglected by their new universities. It is then that transfer students realize they need to receive a specialized orientation to a new campus, academic standards, social environment and campus climate, though the type of

programming should be separate and appropriate for a student population that already has college experience. The problem of marginalization continues into institutional retention programs. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates (2005) suggested that in a time when institutions across the country are focusing on retention efforts, transfer students, again, are largely ignored. This is an unfortunate finding as transfer students make up a critical mass of students at many institutions around the country.

Despite the growing number of students who attend multiple institutions to complete their bachelor's degrees, generally, there is less research conducted on this subset of new students on college campuses. Most of the transfer student research has focused on academic performance as a measure of success (Cejda, Kaylor & Rewey, 1998; Diaz, 1992; Hills, 1965). More recently, studies have begun to examine transfer students beyond academic achievement to include social factors evaluating student adjustment to their new college or university environment (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Davies & Casey, 1999; Laanan, 2001; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Eggleston and Laanan (2001) suggested that "we must understand the needs of these students in order to assess what support programs should provide in an attempt to establish an environment that promotes the opportunity for success ..." (p.88).

Another aspect of existing transfer student research which limits our ability to gain a complete picture of the transfer student experience is the focus on specific transfer student populations. A substantial portion of the research examines community college students who transfer to four-year institutions. The reason for this emphasis stems from the researchers; they are the community college institutional researchers and administrators who want to know how well their students have made the transition to

four-year institutions. Large public four-year institutions are popular venues for transfer student research in part because of the substantial number of student subjects that arrive each semester on these campuses to the exclusion of students who choose to attend private or liberal arts college and universities. Additionally, data collection in transfer student research typically is quantitative and come from existing institutional data or survey methodology (Kozeracki, 2001). Qualitative research is limited.

There is little existing research on transfer student engagement and involvement; most research on college student life focuses on the “traditional” student experience of involvement through student activities, residential experiences and community engagement. Research on how transfer students engage college life is critical to discovering what facilitates and what challenges transfer students to persist to college graduation.

Applications of prominent theories of student success and student persistence also are no longer relevant to the current national undergraduate population. Our undergraduate population now reflects great diversity in student entry years, race/ethnicity, and age and life experience, a population drastically different than the subjects used in Tinto’s research for the theory of student departure (1975, 1987). Transfer students typically are not studied. Developing research centered on transfer student experiences and retention helps practitioners develop appropriate and timely outreach and interventions to reduce student attrition. “Knowing departure risk profiles of transfer students improves educational practice for institutional personnel ... [and] will assist them in targeting students at risk of departure by semester so that institutions can intensify their interactions with these students at risk” (Ishitani, 2008, p. 417). Despite

pre-college traits and characteristics that may influence a student's decision to persist, "decisions to withdraw are more a function of what occurs after entry than of what precedes it" (Tinto, 1987, p.6). We need greater focus on how transfer students adjust to a new institution, become satisfied and successful, and what facilitates their persistence to graduation to improve transfer student retention. The research questions explored in this study are:

- 1) What factors facilitate successful transition to a new institution?
- 2) What key elements facilitate transfer student persistence to graduation?

Purpose

Much of the research existing about transfer student experiences at the baccalaureate level is descriptive, primarily using quantitative research methods (i.e. surveys) or as qualitative research using single interviews or focus groups exclusively. Also lacking in theories of student retention is a focus on the experience of students who change universities and yet pursue their degrees to completion. Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1975) stemmed from research on a student population that was traditionally college-aged white males. The primary purpose of this research is to discover factors that foster successful transition to a four-year institution and persistence to a baccalaureate degree and to examine differences in student demographics to have a better understanding of the diversity of transfer student experiences.

Approach to the Study

A single-case exploratory study was selected as the best way to approach the research questions above. Using existing models of student success and retention, and results from existing transfer student experience to assist in generating a concept of how

transfer students transition to a new university and persist to their bachelor's degrees, this study was designed to discover salient factors in students' adjustment to a new university environment and persistence to graduation for students who stayed at or graduated from the institution ("Persisters") and students who left before completing their degrees ("Non-Persisters".)

Data for this exploratory study came from interviews with 48 transfer students at a small, private, urban university. Initial interviews were conducted with 42 students shortly after their arrival and follow-up interviews were completed with 19 students several semesters into their experience. Thirteen students completed both the initial interview and the follow-up interviews for a total of 48 unique students in the study. The interview protocol was designed to gain insight into how students experienced their initial transition to a new university and reveal the challenges they encountered as well as to guide them to university resources that could assist them with problem resolution. The institution selected was chosen because of its growing population of transfer and its commitment to enhancing transfer students' experiences. Interviewer notes from the initial meetings with transfer students were reviewed. Follow-up interviews were recorded and transcribed to gather all information students shared. Interview notes and transcriptions were coded and analyzed to reveal common themes in the data.

This study will first explore the existing research about the transfer student experience, prominent models of student departure, and student success research. The study will then present individual transfer student stories to frame the complexity of transfer student transition and persistence. The analysis, then, will continue from interviews with transfer students who are examined by their outcome: Persisters, those

who remained enrolled or graduated from the institution and Non-Persisters, students who left the institution after they had enrolled and prior to data analysis. The study concludes with an analysis of the findings as they impact successful transfer student transition and persistence as they pertain to student demographics, course articulation, academic planning, academic performance, financial aid and general finances, student motivation and resilience, balance of out-of-class commitments, student engagement and support. The findings bring forth the need for updated research on student retention and persistence to include the undergraduate population of today with a greater emphasis on transfer students, non-traditional students and commuters. The findings suggest ways that university administrators can better serve transfer student needs and enhance their success and persistence.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Dimensions of the Problem

Transfer students have been part of the higher education landscape since the inception of the junior college system in the early twentieth century (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997), but it was not until the 1960s that researchers and administrators began to take a greater interest in their characteristics and behaviors. Hill (1965) evaluate transfer students' academic performances over four decades and found that the grade point averages of these students dropped significantly during their first semester after transferring to a new college or university. Starting with this finding, a small but dedicated group of researchers has taken an interest in what transfer students experience when entering a new institution. Transfer students have become a more prominent student population in the last few decades, but we still know relatively little about what makes them successful, how applicable well-known theories of student retention reflect their experiences on college campuses, and practically, how to help students overcome process and policy challenges as well as the general adjustment issues they face at colleges and universities across the country.

In 1976, Sandeen and Goodale summarized many issues transfer students still face today when they arrive at their next institution. These issues regard negative attitudes toward transfer students, admissions, new student programs, registration, academic advising, student financial aid, adjustment to institution change, and credit articulation. More recently, Laanan, Starobin, and Eggleston (2010) affirmed the continuing significant challenges faced by transfer students:

Barriers to successful transfer can be attributed to lack of academic preparation, inaccurate transfer advising, unfamiliarity of academic expectations and rigor of the senior institution, and weak transfer and articulation policies. Taken together these challenges can create challenges for transfer students upon entering the 4-year institution (p. 176).

Today, nearly 60 percent of undergraduates attend more than one institution (Adelman, 2006). The six-year completion rates for students who earn degrees from a different four-year college than the one where they started are in the 62–67 percent range, whereas for those students who remained at one college throughout their bachelor's degrees, the completion rate was between 54 and 58 percent (Adelman, 2006).

McCormick and Carroll (1997) examined 1994 data gathered from 1990 Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Longitudinal Study for the National Center of Education Statistics, reporting that 45 percent of the sample had enrolled as undergraduates at more than one institution by 1994. One-third of the students had attended two institutions, and 12 percent had attended three or more institutions. Almost 29 percent of undergraduates who began at a four-year institution transferred: 16 percent of those students went to another four-year institution, and 13 percent to a less-than-four-year institution. Adelman (2005) found that forty percent of traditional-age students (ages 18-24) who entered postsecondary education in the 1990s started in community colleges. For beginning students who started at age 24 or older, more than 60 percent first entered community colleges (Adelman, 2005). Considering age alone, one can see that community college serves as a common starting point before transferring to a four-year institution. Understanding the transfer pipeline is essential in guiding theory, research,

policy and practice to guide transfer students acclimation, successful and persistence at four-year institutions.

P. Bauer and K. Bauer (1994) accurately described transfer students as being on their own and having to “fend for themselves” at many institutions (p.116). First-year programs are designed to help new students get their questions answered quickly by providing specific offices and mentors for them. Transfer students often do not have these types of programs. When transfer students arrive on campus, they may have difficulty finding resources to help them as they adjust to a new campus and environment. Services they need often are decentralized, and they may go to several offices before finding the answer to one question.

Not surprisingly, Laanan (1996) asserted that transfer students feel ignored and neglected by their universities. Davies and Casey (1999) studied students who reported feeling like second-class citizens. These students are new to the campus, and they require similar services as any new student does when orienting to a new campus, academic standards, social environment and campus climate. The problem of marginalization continues into institutional retention programs. Kuh, et al. (2005) suggested that in a time when institutions across the country are focusing on retention efforts, transfer students are largely ignored. This is unfortunate as transfer students make up a critical mass of students at some institutions around the country.

Most transfer student research has focused primarily on academic performance as a measure of success (Cejda et al, 1998; Diaz, 1992; Hill, 1965), and most of these studies were quantitative, primarily using institutional data or data gathered through survey instruments (Kozieracki, 2001). Recently, studies have begun to examine transfer

students from a holistic perspective by considering academic factors beyond academic achievement, and social factors to evaluate how students adjust to their new college or university environment (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Davies & Casey, 1999; Laanan, 2001; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Eggleston and Laanan (2001) suggested that “we must understand the needs of these students in order to assess what support programs we should provide in an attempt to establish an environment that promotes the opportunity for success and helps reduce the effects of transfer shock” (p.88). This positive shift in focus on transfer student adjustment and how we can best serve our transfer students shows great promise for improving institutional practice on transfer student success and persistence, but currently, more questions than answers exist about those needs and best practices to serve them. Ishitani (2008) emphasized that “knowing departure risk profiles of transfer students improves educational practice for institutional personnel...[and] will assist them in targeting students at risk of departure by semester so that institutions can intensify their interactions with these students at risk” (p. 417). The direction of this research could offer colleges guidance about where to target precious resources to provide effective support services for transition and degree completion.

Who Are the Transfer Students?

To determine the needs of the transfer student population in American higher education, one needs to understand the demographics of this student group. “Transfer students vary in age, gender, race, ethnicity, employment patterns, persistence, academic backgrounds, and socioeconomic backgrounds” (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001, p. 89). The demographic research that exists focuses on transfer students who have come from the community college setting. Forty percent of traditionally-aged and 60 percent of

nontraditionally-aged students begin their college careers at community colleges (Adelman, 2005). Community college students tend to work more and are from lower socioeconomic status (Adelman, 2005).

Focusing on the qualitative descriptors of transfer students, Pascarella (1999) asserted that transfer students utilize community colleges as a cost-effective means to achieving a bachelor's degree. Students also choose community colleges to gain more focus on career and vocational direction (Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000). Adelman (2005) found that,

students whose high school academic performance was at best mediocre, who were not consistently (if at all) committed to earning a bachelor's degree, who delayed entry to postsecondary education, who intended to major in an occupationally oriented field, and who came from suburban high schools are more likely to begin their college careers in community colleges (at least compared to starting in a four-year college) (p. 47).

Surette (2001) found women less likely to transfer than men and also less likely to earn their bachelor's degree if they transferred, even when controlling for marital status, having children, and occupational choices. Ishitani (2008) found sophomore and junior transfer students were 73% less likely to transfer than freshman transfer students. Crisp and Nunez (2014) found that there is still a large gap in underrepresented students of color who transfer to four-year universities from community colleges. Ishitani (2008) also found that minority students showed a lower risk of departing during their first two semesters after transfer, but once they returned for their third semester, they were 68% more likely to leave the institution than their white counterparts.

Transfer student movement is also more complex than typically thought.

Willingham (as cited in Sandeen and Goodale (1976) described the transfer student movements that existed then and are still the primary categories of transfer student movement. The largest group (and what many typically associate with transfer students) are the vertical transfers (students who begin in a two-year institution and move to a four-year institution.) Horizontal transfers move from a four-year college or university to another baccalaureate institution, or move from one two-year college to another. Reverse transfers are students who begin in four-year institutions and move to two-year colleges (Kozieracki, 2001). A group that Willingham (as cited in Sandeen and Goodale (1976) identified as Double Reverse Transfer (students who transfer from a four-year to a two-year, and then back to a four-year) are now more commonly known as multiple transfers.

Students who transfer multiple times before completing their college degrees have become an area of significant research. G. Kearney, Townsend and T. Kearney (1995) examined the characteristics and behaviors of 420 students who had transferred from two or more institutions to their current four-year institution. The sample studied was typically white, 18 to 22 years of age, full-time, and carried sophomore or junior status. Seventy-two percent of the students had attended two colleges prior to their current university. Smaller percentages had attended three colleges (21%) and 7% had attended between four and seven institutions. Through their survey, the researchers found that the reason these students departed from one institution and moved to another was primarily because of the quality of academic programs, and secondarily, the variety of courses and programs. They also found this group was more intent on graduating from the subject university than their first-year counterparts and held strong aspirations for degrees

beyond the baccalaureate. The researchers concluded that these students were the “ultimate Persisters” because they made a conscious choice with each transfer decision to remain in higher education and ultimately plan to complete their degrees. G. Kearney et al. (1995) also concluded these students did not make poor institutional choices about previous colleges and universities as may be perceived about students who transfer multiple times; in fact, they believed that these students “were bright, highly motivated individuals who did not hesitate to leave an institution when they judged the costs of remaining to outweigh the perceived benefits of transferring elsewhere” (p. 339). However, multiple transfer students’ frequent inter-institutional movements may “preclude the likelihood that any one institution’s curriculum will have a significant impact” (G. Kearney, 1995, p.341). For these students, though, G. Kearney et al. (1995) concluded that “... transferring is a good thing” (p.339).

A more recently identified phenomenon of transfer students is called “swirlers.” These students alternate from one institution type (most of which begin in four-year institutions (63%) to another institution type (two-year if they started at a four-year college or university, for example) in no distinctive pattern and attend several institutions in this pattern of swirling. Students must complete at least 10 credits at each institution to be considered a swirler (Adelman, 2006; Borden, 2004). Adelman (2005) reported that 28 percent of students at community colleges would be considered swirlers. Adelman also described this group as less committed to achieving a bachelor’s degree. They received their bachelor’s degree at a rate ten percent lower than those who started at four-year institutions. Swirlers are difficult to track and defy our traditional retention theories and the way institutions calculate their retention rates.

Obstacles to Successful Transfer Transition

As mentioned previously in Sandeen and Goodale (1976), transfer students have always experienced problems moving between institutions. One of the areas of targeted concern is the transfer of students from community colleges. Perhaps one of the reasons why community college students experience difficulties is institutional bias. Pascarella (1997) articulated a pecking order of institutions in higher education. Elite research and liberal arts colleges characterized by selective admissions practices, scholarly faculty, and campuses that serve primarily residential, full-time students serve as the public standard: “the more an institution deviates from this set of standards, the lower it ranks in the status hierarchy, the less likely it is to be seen as providing a quality undergraduate education, and the more invisible it becomes to the American public” (Pascarella, 1997, p.15).

Berger and Malaney (2003) suggest the

hesitancy on the part of four-year colleges to enroll transfers from community colleges has been attributed to perceptions by four-year institutional administrators that community college transfer students are less prepared for success and less likely to adjust to campus life ... (p.3).

The bias is not entirely unfounded. In a working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research, Long and Kurleander (2008) found that students who began their bachelors’ degrees at community colleges were 14.5 percent less likely to complete their degrees over nine years compared with those students who began their baccalaureate degrees at a four-year institution. When considering the increasing number of students who begin their bachelor’s degrees at community colleges, colleges and universities must

find ways to help these students complete their four-year degrees to meet the degree level students needed to meet today's workforce needs.

Current institutional practices may contribute to the lower rates of completion. Four-year institutions often use transfer students to fill the remainder of their incoming classes and meet enrollment goals, as evidenced by later application deadlines for transfer students than for new first-year students at many institutions around the country. Additionally, transfer students are overlooked in their eligibility for scholarships, financial aid, and timely registration (Kodama, 2002). Through these practices, institutions marginalize and disadvantage transfer students from the beginning of their experience with four-year institutions.

Articulation Policies and Loss of Credits

One of the greatest frustrations for transfer students is the loss of credits in moving from one institution to another (Laanan, 1996, 2001; Lee, 2001). Time lost in academic credits leads to increased time to graduation which likely means greater financial cost to the student. Over the past several decades, institutions and states have worked to create comprehensive articulation agreements. Articulation agreements are the results of partnerships between postsecondary institutions and serve as an official agreement which determines course, program or degree equivalencies between colleges and/or universities (Ignash & Townsend, 2000). These agreements vary widely in scope from statewide transfer core curriculum agreements for all public universities, to individual institutional agreements with other colleges and universities from whom they receive the most transfer students.

Statewide transfer and articulation agreements exist in a majority of states today and assist students in making a relatively seamless transfer of credit from one institution to another. Articulation agreements are updated on a regular basis and work to resolve changes in curricula. For transfer students, these articulation agreements occur most readily between community colleges and public four-year institutions but also exist between other institutional types. Articulation agreements are not a perfect solution to credit issues for transfer students, but help students retain a majority of credit hours from one institution to another. Among institutions that do not fall under the statewide public postsecondary system, course articulation is often done with individual institutions and in many cases with individual course articulation requests. According to Lee (2001),

The articulation agreements, under ideal circumstances, are a means of standardizing the transfer process and theoretically should enhance the chances of movement through the educational pipeline. Although the process is specified on paper, the implementation of the process is subject to interpretation by many within both institutions. A policy that is intended to make the process clear and specific is, in effect, a source of confusion and frustration for the students whom it is intended to benefit (p.40).

It is difficult for researchers to determine the scope of credit loss for the average transfer student because articulation agreements vary widely and decisions about which courses transfer may be discerned on an individual basis.

Rhine et al. (2000) asserted that students felt an “overwhelming frustration” towards their community college “... for issuing nontransferable credits, and toward the 4-year college or university for not accepting the credits” (p.449). This disappointment

may lead students to choose a four-year institution that helps them complete their degree the fastest, which should not be the driving factor in choosing a baccalaureate institution. Students in this study also expressed frustration in meeting their four-year institution's prerequisite requirements: "students may transfer in with all of his or her general education requirements completed, but if they have not completed a lower-level prerequisite course specific to their major it may delay graduation by one or more semesters" (Rhine et al., 2000, p. 449).

Understanding Financial Aid Packages and Financial Aid Programs

As noted earlier, one of the reasons students choose community colleges as their entry point into higher education is for lower tuition rates (Pascarella, 1999). These lower tuition bills lead to financial aid packages that look significantly different than those they receive at more costly four-year institutions. Financial aid packages at four-year institutions may include federal state and/or institutional grants, merit scholarships, student loans, and/or federal or institutional work-study. Transfer students need to understand their financial obligations to their new institutions and how these financial aid packages will change over their remaining time with the institution. In some states, such as Minnesota, for example, students will only receive state grant money for eight semesters of enrollment. Students who have taken a "nontraditional" path through higher education with possible stop-outs or increased time to make up for lost credits may find themselves in situations where they will complete their bachelor's degrees in nine or more semesters and may thus, lose state grant money eligibility. When the average time to complete a baccalaureate degree for those who do not take any significant time off is at best 57 months (almost five years), and the average completion time is one and one-half

years longer, approximately six and one-half years for those who begin at a community college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003), it seems there is a significant misalignment in student financial expectations. This state financial aid program does not allow for flexibility on the path to degree completion that more of our postsecondary students have chosen to take. Alpern (2000) and Davies and Casey (1999) found that students want accurate and precise information about financial aid at the institution they plan to attend. If they do not receive that kind of information, their satisfaction and ultimately their persistence to degree are compromised.

Credit articulation and financial aid are critical issues for transfers to receive transparent information. In general, how well students prepare themselves for their transfer to a new university as well as their perception of the ease in transferring, form the foundation on which they base their satisfaction with their new college university, according to Berger and Malaney (2003).

Programs and Services for New Transfer Students

Students who transfer “...face new psychological, academic and environmental challenges” at their new institutions (Laanan, 2001, p.5). New transfer students need support in the first weeks or through the first semester at their new institution (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). According to Eggleston and Laanan (2001),

new student orientation programs should be developed specifically to help transfer students navigate institutional structures and the campus community. There is a strong need for these programs to be exclusive to transfer students. These orientation programs should not be intertwined with freshman student

orientations. Because of the issues of course articulation and selection, registration for transfer students is often difficult (p.90).

Several researchers argue that institutions must do a better job of leading students to critical resources rather than just offer them (Kuh, et al., 2005; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Depending on each institution, transfer student needs are met in very different ways. At some institutions, there will be a minimal orientation process for these students. At other institutions, transfer student orientation is combined with first-year student orientation which often means they are treated as having first-year student needs. These students have different needs and concerns, and if they are not addressed, transfer students feel marginalized. At model institutions, dedicated centers exist to serve transfer students exclusively with their adjustment to the new campus both academically, socially and personally. The spectrum of services offered to new transfer students at four-year institutions depends where these students fall on an institution's priority list.

“Transfer Shock” and Academic Acclimation

First identified by Hill (1965), transfer students typically experience a significant drop in academic performance as demonstrated by grade point average in the first semester at a new college or university. Diaz (1992) found, in a meta-analysis of 62 studies, that 79 percent of students experienced drops in grade point averages of one-half a point, but 67 percent of those students recovered their grades after the first year. Researchers continue to find a characteristic dip in grade point averages for students today (Ishitani, 2008; Rhine et al., 2000). Originally, rigorous academic standards experienced at the four-year institutional level served as the explanation for the negative change in grade point averages (GPA), but now researchers have begun to examine the

complex interplay of the personal, academic and social changes transfer students experience as new members of a college or university community as impacting their GPAs (Laanan, 2001).

Academic Integration to Campus Community

One of the most important roles of a transfer student is to become acclimated academically. Extensive research by Hagedorn et al. (2004, 2006, and 2008) found that strong academic performance and success at community colleges is highly predictive of successful transition, integration and predicts greater persistence at four-year colleges. The application of this research is limited, however, to those students who transferred from a community college setting, though it is a step in the right direction to understand pre-arrival factors of a sub-population of transfer students that contribute to their retention.

Academic integration is about not only a student's academic achievement, but the support they receive in becoming successful students on campus through academic advising and accessibility to faculty. Students describe coursework as more demanding and faculty as less involved on the four-year level. Students in the Townsend and Wilson (2006) study described faculty emphasis on research as an indication that they didn't care about teaching students. Townsend and Wilson (2006) explained this experience as a student disconnect or a misunderstanding of the mission of the university as a research-intensive institution. Davies and Casey (1999) also found that students were frustrated with the lecture nature of their courses, being taught by teaching assistants, and perceiving that their assignments were not reviewed by the professors. Students in a study by Townsend and Wilson (2006) found that their university classrooms fostered greater

anonymity and that students in those classes were less willing to form study groups. Students in each of these studies perceived they would receive the same type of individual attention at their four-year institutions as they had received at their community colleges. Berger and Malaney (2003) found that satisfaction with academic support was lower than other types of satisfaction due to students' difficulty finding faculty members and getting academic advising as they had in their community colleges. Berger and Malaney (2003) also found that students who were "most involved with and serious about academic life were least likely to be academically satisfied at the university" (p.15). Additionally, transfer students' perception of a stigma associated with their transfer student status negatively influenced their academic adjustment (Laanan, Starobin & Eggleston, 2010).

Social Integration to Campus Community

According to Tinto's (1975, 1987) theory of student departure, academic and social integration are key to student persistence to graduation. Students from community colleges are accustomed to classrooms that serve a dual purpose for academic and social engagement. Laanan et. al (2010) affirmed that students' experiences with faculty could positively impact transfer students' adjustment, particularly social integration, to a four-year university. Berger and Malaney (2003) found that students who were more socially engaged on campus claimed to be more satisfied with their experience. Laanan et al. (2010) also found that transfer student satisfaction with the general university environment factored into their social adjustment. Townsend and Wilson (2006) suggested that institutions should facilitate social integration of their transfer students by connecting them with upperclassmen. Despite the emphasis on the necessity of social

integration to persist for transfer students, there is a paucity of research on the social elements of transfer students' experiences.

Nontraditional Students Needs

As a growing segment of the transfer student population and undergraduate population generally, students entering postsecondary education for the ages of 25 and older in 2006 was 6.8 million students and is projected to become 8.1 million (an increase of 35 percent) by 2017, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008). In that same time period, traditionally-aged postsecondary enrollees are projected to increase by 10 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). The National Center for Education Statistics (2002) defines a nontraditional student as "... one who has any of the following characteristics: delays enrollment for one year or more after finishing high school, enrolls part-time, works at least 35 hours or more per week while enrolled as a student, is considered financial independent from their parents, has children, is a single parent, or does not have a high school diploma or a General Education Diploma (GED). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2002), almost 75 percent of undergraduate students are nontraditional by this definition. Reflecting a majority of students on college and university campuses today, it is necessary to determine how to best serve their needs while attending universities. Townsend and Wilson (2006) found that adult students perceive they have more difficulty integrating socially on campuses that "... cater to traditional-age college students who attend full-time and live on or near the campus" (p.450).

Student Success and Student Persistence

To begin to examine how transfer students become successful students at their new universities, one must consider the research on student success and student persistence. Academic preparation and motivation are continually identified as the best predictors of student persistence to graduation (Pascarella, 1991, 2005). Kezar in Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) stated that the central concept of retention is to develop “a climate that is conducive to students as well as helping students to make appropriate choices that make them successful” (p.xii). The traditional measurement of college student retention is completion of the baccalaureate degree, but Kezar (2004) emphasized, as noted above, that degree completion is not the sole gauge of success, but it is how students achieve success. Student persistence is aligned with concepts of student success. Kuh et al. (2005) consider higher-than-predicted scoring institutions on the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) to be measures of student success. Institutions today focus their efforts on holistic preparation of students to meet success in their collegiate careers academically, socially, psychologically, emotionally and culturally as well as preparing them to engage in the world successfully after graduation. The roots of college student persistence theories, however, remain focused on the ultimate measure of persistence: completing the bachelor’s degree.

Theories of Student Persistence

Vincent Tinto (1975) conceptualized factors that contribute to a student’s departure from college. He theorized that students enter college with varying patterns of personal, family and academic characteristics and skills. These intentions and commitments are modified and reworked through students’ interactions with the academic and social aspects of the institution where they are enrolled. Satisfying interactions strengthen an individual’s

commitment to the institution and to his/her own educational goals which lead to greater integration and thus to persistence. Negative interactions reduce academic and social integration which in turn, reduce an individual's goal and institutional commitments and lead to departure from the college or university (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987, 1975). Despite pre-college traits and characteristics that may influence a student's decision to persist, "decisions to withdraw are more a function of what occurs after entry than of what precedes it" (Tinto, 1987, p.6).

Tinto (1987) argues that the primary roots of departure for an individual are intention and commitment. Intentions may vary for individuals entering a college or university. They may attend to satisfy their own goals of obtaining a bachelor's degree, or they may continue their education to satisfy a loved one's wishes. They may enroll with intent not to graduate but to refine skills for employment purposes. Students choose to enroll in college for many reasons, but the intention behind that enrollment lays the foundation for the commitment needed to achieve their educational goals. Commitment defines a person's willingness to achieve a desired goal. Without commitment, the motivation to succeed is lost.

Adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation are outcomes of an individual's interactions with the institution that link to individual departure (Tinto, 1987). "Entry to college requires that individuals at least partially separate themselves from past forms of association and patterns of behavior" (Tinto, 1987, p.48). Some students have more difficulty adjusting to their new environment or letting go of their former environment; either way, their adjustment is hindered. Difficulty, according to Tinto (1987), refers to academic struggles and academic unpreparedness and will likely

result in departure (voluntary or forced). Incongruence causes students to feel there is an academic, social or environmental mismatch. As a result, students' needs are not met, and departure is more likely.

When there is isolation, students have difficulty making significant connections with other members of the campus community. Frequent contact with faculty members appears to be an important relationship for students to have to persist at an institution (Tinto, 1987, 1998). A student's obligations outside the classroom and off-campus (for example, family and employment) can lead to isolation. Commuter students, in particular, are at-risk of this isolation. Their time on campus is limited, in many cases, to the time they are in class and doing class-related work. They have less time to engage with the campus community socially because of external demands like family and work (Braxton, et al., 2004).

Tinto's theory (1975, 1987) of student departure emphasizes students' academic and social integration upon arrival to their college or university. Many factors enhance or impede a students' ability to integrate into their campus community. Critical to persistence are the connections students build with faculty, staff and students and the identity they build for themselves as members of the campus community.

Critiques of Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

Despite wide acceptance of Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1975, 1987), the support for the theory through empirical testing is mixed (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997). Many have criticized the conceptual foundation of the theory (Attinasi, 1992; Braxton et al., 2004). Attinasi (1992) criticized the foundation on which Tinto's theory of student departure is based and argued that a theory of student departure should

originate from the experiences in the daily lives of college students rather than from the experiences of those who contemplate or commit suicide on which Tinto's theory (1975, 1987) is established.

Braxton et al. (2004) discussed the limits in the scope of Tinto's theory on academic and social integration and concluded that the theory of student persistence should take a holistic perspective by including economic, organizational, psychological and sociological constructs along with academic and social integration. Their research found that the institution type (residential versus commuter) plays a significant role in the emphasis of the theory of persistence. At commuter colleges and universities, the academic dimension plays a stronger role than social integration because students focus their time on campus for educationally-purposeful activities: "As a consequence of the absence of well-defined social structures in commuter colleges and universities, the academic dimensions of the commuter institution play a consequential role in the student departure process" (Braxton, et al., 2004, p.48). At this type of institution, social integration results from the communities that form within the classrooms. Thus, the academic environment serves dual purposes in gaining student satisfaction and resulting in student persistence. Braxton et al. (2004) reformulated Tinto's theory of student departure (1975, 1987) for commuter colleges and universities. In this revision, they argue students' entry characteristics, external factors, the campus environment, and the academic community influence students' determining institutional commitment and ultimately, the ability to persist.

At residential colleges and universities, institutions become the student's home and they spend many hours outside of the classroom and thus, the social nature of a

student's integration should be emphasized. Braxton et al. (2004) also reformulated Tinto's theory (1975, 1987) for residential colleges emphasizing that students' initial institutional commitment influences their institutional experiences which in turn impacts their level of social integration. This level of social integration affects their institution commitment and thus, level of persistence.

Ultimately, institutions, regardless of type and student orientation, should align all policies, programs and practices to reduce student departure. No single approach to college student persistence will work for all institutions; each institution must look at its distinctive features to tailor effective student retention efforts (Kuh et al., 2005).

Braxton et al. (2004) considered Tinto's (1975, 1987) concept of social integration on a larger scale and found six critical factors influencing this type of integration: students' perception of their college or university's commitment to their welfare, how true students perceive the institution and its leadership to be to its mission and values, the potential students see to find people like themselves in the community, proactive social adjustment, how much students invest in social engagements, and their satisfaction with the costs of attending the university. Cabrera et al. (1990) found that a student's ability to pay impacts their academic, social integration and commitment to their own educational goals and the institution. Braxton et al. expand the definition of ability to pay to include the desire to pay when students analyze the value of the education they receive against the monetary cost to them. They also recommend that financial aid should be awarded to students with demonstrated real financial need as opposed to those who receive financial aid as part of their admission office's strategy to

recruit students. The bottom line is that students' ability to pay directly impacts their ability to persist.

Critical Points to Enhance Student Persistence

Tinto's model (1975, 1987) disregards the points at which student or institutional behaviors may affect decisions that contribute to success or departure. Students' perceptions of how well they will integrate into their new college environments begin during the college admissions process. Alpern (2000) and Berger and Malaney (2003) discussed the importance of receiving accurate information about the institution for transfer students, but getting the right information about quality, standards, values and overall character of the institution at that point in time applies to all students. During the admissions process, students formulate academic and social expectations about the experience they will have (Tinto, 1987). If students form unrealistic expectations, they are more likely to feel mismatched with the institution and increase their chances of departing. New student orientation is another critical point. Orientation must "... go beyond the provision of information per se to the establishment of early contacts for new students not only with other members of their entering class but also with other students, faculty, and staff of the institution" (Tinto, 1987, p. 147). The best orientation programs extend those connection-building opportunities throughout the first year in college (Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfe, 1986; Tinto, 1987, 1998).

Additional opportunities for students to engage in formalized integrated social and academic ways like we see in learning communities provide many benefits to students. Research demonstrates that learning communities provide students with opportunities to actively learn with one another and support each other both in and out of the classroom

which lead to greater student persistence (Tinto, 2000). Students in learning communities also earned higher grade point averages, were more actively involved on campus, had more positive views of their classmates, faculty and the college as a whole and were more satisfied with their own involvement in college life (Tinto, 1993). Learning communities at commuter colleges and universities can be a particularly effective retention practice. Braxton, et al. (2004) suggest that “the probability of student departure from a commuter college or university decreases for students who participate in communities of learning” (p. 40).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) and Braxton and Mundy (2001) believe that small policy and programmatic changes are more effective than one large change in impacting student retention. Additionally, every member of the institution needs to be committed to student retention and to finding ways to impact their students’ experiences. Finally, Braxton et al. (2004) argue that institutional “policies and practices should empower students to take responsibility for their own college success” (p. 68).

Where Two Theories of Student Departure Meet

Using two predominant theories of student departure in Tinto’s (1975, 1987) Model of Student Departure and Bean’s (1980) Model of Student Attrition, Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora and Hengstler (1992) wanted to evaluate these two dominant concepts to determine how the theories could be merged to give a better understanding of why college students persist. The researchers studied a group of first-year, full-time traditionally-aged students longitudinally and found the results to be consistent with the student populations on whom Tinto (1975, 1987) and Bean (1980) based their models. They found both models demonstrated that college student persistence is a complex set of

interactions between the student's personal factors and institutional factors, and a student's intent to persist is a result of how well the student is matched to the institution. The researchers also suggest that Tinto's (1975, 1987) Model of Student Integration seems to be more robust than Bean's (1980) Model of Student Attrition, but that the external factors Bean has in his model play a more significant role than Tinto's model suggests. Cabrera et al. (1992) concluded that Tinto's (1975, 1987) and Bean's (1980) theories were complementary, but that the main contribution of Bean's theory of student attrition is the consideration of external factors to student persistence.

Adding Emotional and Social Factors to Predict Student Success

The focus on student success and retention research has been on demographic, academic and institutional variables. Pritchard and Wilson (2003) argued that other factors may influence students' abilities to succeed in college. They studied undergraduates at a private university in the Midwest on the impact of emotional and social factors on student persistence. The researchers found that emotional health, particularly coping tactics, impact a student's grade point average and his/her intent to leave the institution. Social health, particularly membership in honors organization and frequency of alcohol consumption, impacted both the student's GPA and intent to depart, but to a lesser degree than emotional health. Pritchard and Wilson (2003) also found that "students who indicated their intent to drop out of school reported more fatigue and had lower self-esteem than their peers" (p. 25). Thus, a student's ability to handle the emotional stresses encountered by college students is an important factor in student persistence. Pritchard and Wilson's (2003) research lends evidence to the growing body of research on factors that impact a student's ability and desire to persist in college.

Students Defining College Success

Researchers have spent significant time defining college student success through academic, social, psychological, and personal factors. “Success has often been equated with doing well academically or graduating. Although good grades and graduation are important to college students, it is possible that they view success more broadly than researchers” (Yazedjian, Toews, Sevin, & Purswell, 2008, p.145). Yazedjian et al. (2008) explored the factors that promote student success in college from the student perspective through narratives. The subjects in this study were first-year students. Yazedjian et al. (2008) found that students’ definition of success included three broad areas: “good grades, social integration and the ability to navigate the college environment” (p. 145). To these students, “good grades” (academic success) meant getting the grades they were satisfied with and that met their expectations and did not mean a specific grade point average or getting an “A”. Social integration meant a sense of connectedness to the university and other students which is similar to Tinto’s (1975) description of social integration though these students also included balancing an active social life with academic demands. The final area of students’ definition of success is the ability to navigate the college environment. To these students, this meant self-responsibility and independence allowing them to transition into adult roles.

Yazedjian et al. (2008) found that students take a holistic view of their success as a college student to encompass their academic, social, and personal lives. This study also found that students needed to “readjust their expectations regarding the degree of work it would take to be successful in college” (Yazedjian, 2008, p. 151). This research suggests that describing college student success and the strategies students use to achieve their

definition of success is not a static concept; it changes and adapts with student as they progress through their college career.

Practical Applications of What Makes Students Succeed

To examine student success from an alternative angle, we can look at what institutions deemed as strong in promoting student success do for their students. Kuh et al. (2005) selected 20 institutions representing the diversity of four-year colleges and universities that had higher-than-expected graduation rates and higher-than-expected scores on the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE). What sets these 20 schools and other educationally effective institutions apart from the majority is how well they implement their programs and practices and the meaningful ways one or many of these initiatives have touched a large number of students (Kuh et al., 2005). From the study of these schools over the course of two years, Kuh et al. (2005) have determined the following principles for promoting student success:

- a living institutional mission that drives university decisions and serves the students in becoming what they hope to become;
- policies that support students in academic and social dimensions;
- providing a wealth of resources to students to help them establish themselves as active learners; setting high expectations;
- staying focused on initiatives for an extended period of time;
- creating a culture that supports students;
- utilizing data to drive “reflection and action; and
- developing complementary philosophies between academic and student affairs (pp. 266-278).

Student success comes from complementarities of the student's effort to engage the institution academically and socially and the institution's efforts to create an environment through policy and practice that supports holistic student development.

Nontraditional Student Success

As a growing number of nontraditional students enter the traditional college environment, it is important to understand what makes this student population succeed. Adult students bring new dimensions to their classrooms and their campuses. Compton, Cox and Laanan (2006) suggested that adult learners focus on their goals for education. Tinto (1987) suggested that these students tend to be more committed to their educational goals than their younger counterparts. These students enroll for a specific reason and they view education as a means to an end. They may return to college to begin or finish a bachelor's degree or to enhance their skill sets for future employment. "The majority of adult students are led back to higher education due to a major life transition, such as divorce, widowhood, or career change" (Compton et al. 2006, p. 74). Adult learners bring life and work experience with them to the classrooms. Some institutions create innovative customized education plans to give credit through testing or portfolio analysis to reward students for previous experiences. Bean and Metzner (1987) found the academic offerings play an important role in adult students' satisfaction with the educational experience they receive. Berger and Malaney (2003) found that adult students are more satisfied with academic advising and faculty accessibility than their younger counterparts. They also found that these students were more likely to achieve better grades which may be attributed to their skill in utilizing advising and faculty services. Richardson and King (1998) assert that adult students use time-management strategies more effectively than

traditionally-aged students. While adult students bring diverse perspectives and skills to their colleges, they typically are underappreciated for their contributions to the campus culture in part because of their more intentional and often times more limited engagement with the campus community.

Fostering Commuter Student Success

Horn and Berkold (1998) reported that 82.7 percent of undergraduate students were identified as commuter students. A common definition of a commuter student is someone who does not live in institution-owned housing (Horn & Berkold, 1998; Jacoby, 1989). Commuter students, which represent a large percentage of transfer students across higher education, constitute a diverse group of students in age, enrollment status, employment status, and how they view their identities as students. Horn and Berkold (1998) found that 29 percent of all undergraduates identified themselves as employees who go to school. This finding evidenced the shift to a secondary college student identity for a significant portion of the student population. Despite the diversity within this student population, common concerns face them: transportation issues, multiple life roles, merging of on-and off-campus support systems and lack of sense of belonging (Jacoby, 2000). Astin (1985) asserted that administrators and educators need to understand the challenges commuter students face:

Educators are in reality competing with other forces in the student's life for a share of that finite time and energy. The student's investment in matters relating to family, friends, jobs and other outside activities represent a reduction in the time and energy the student has to devote to his or her educational development (p. 143).

Colleges and universities must embrace the limited time commuter students have and provide them with the programs, policies, and high quality learning when they are on-campus.

Johnson (1997) found that academic and social integration are critical to the persistence of commuter students which runs counter to common belief that expectations of academic and social integration do not apply to commuter students. Involvement on campus in academic and social life presents unique obstacles for commuter students. The perception of these students is that they are not interested in being involved on campus and are less motivated to achieve their educational goals (Jacoby, 2000). There is also a common perception that the programs, policies and opportunities made available for residential students will work for commuter students as well and if commuter students tried a little harder to take advantage of these opportunities, they would have a better experience (Jacoby, 1989). According to Jacoby (1989), commuter students find many institutions do not include them as full community members because campus cultures often caters to the traditionally-aged, full-time residential student. Jacoby's (1989, 2000) work offered a framework for thinking about commuter student needs from the perspective of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. Maslow (1954) asserted that an individual cannot attend to higher level needs (esteem and self-actualization through education) if more basic physiological and safety needs are not met. According to Jacoby (2000), "a commuter student who has not found satisfactory living or transportation arrangements is not able to concentrate on involvement in learning" (p. 9). Institutions must provide "services to help students meet students' basic needs for housing,

transportation, food, security, health care and child care” (Jacoby & Garland, 2004, p. 65).

Jacoby and Garland (2004) offered several suggestions for commuter student success based on previous research and appropriate theoretical applications. They recommended creating a center to assist students from pre-admission through the first semester to help students tackle all functions related to institutional entry and transition. It is best to offer these services in a physical office on-campus and online. Admissions offices must create an accurate and comprehensive view of what it is to be a student at that institution and how their basic needs will be satisfied by the institution. According to Jacoby and Garland (2004), financial aid packages should “... ensure that expense budgets used to determine the amount of financial need realistically reflect educational as well as living costs, such as rent, transportation, child care and food” (p. 71).

Commuter students should be encouraged to work on-campus if possible and informed of advantages this work environment creates for them. Orientation programs should make students feel welcome on campus in an equal manner, and this orientation must offer an opportunity to “...work with an advisor or mentor to carefully think through and articulate their educational goals” (Jacoby & Garland, 2004, p.71). Johnson’s (1997) findings supported the need for commuter students to feel a sense of community in their college or university. How they are welcomed into the community is critical to that perception of membership. Johnson (1997) found that efforts for integration should focus on the academic climate. Classroom-based learning communities can be particularly effective for engaging commuter students academically and socially (Jacoby and Garland, 2004; Tinto, 1987, 2000). Class scheduling for students commuting to

campus can be problematic. Jacoby and Garland (2004) suggested offering early morning and late afternoon courses that accommodate those commuter students with full weekday work schedules as well as online courses for students to complete at their convenience. Extracurricular activities should be offered at varied times of the day for commuter students to take advantage of, and commuter students should be considered for leadership roles. Additionally, off-campus leadership roles should receive equal acknowledgement to positions students have on-campus (Jacoby & Garland, 2004).

Fostering Transfer Student Success

How student success is applied to transfer students has not been well-researched. Perhaps one of the reasons for this pertains to the diversity of the student population. Regardless, as transfer students become a larger segment of the undergraduate population nationwide, institutions and researchers need to dedicate time to determine what transfer students need to become successful. Berger and Malaney (2003) found that immersion with peers into campus life led to greater satisfaction with transfer students' university experience and that overall satisfaction was higher when students lived and worked on campus. Knowing the diversity of the transfer student population and its general propensity towards being commuter students, this type of initiative only applies a small portion of the total transfer student population. Berger and Malaney (2003) recommend that some transfer students might need assistance in finding balance between academics and social activities. Davies and Casey (1999) found that on-campus social support systems were important to transfer students whether that support comes from a faculty member, their classmates, or another member of their transfer cohort. For community college students transitioning to the four-year college environment, Laanan (1996)

recommended that institutions offer workshops including former community college students to discuss the necessary skills and information students need. To improve transfer student service and help students successfully graduate, Davies and Casey (1999) recommend campuses specifically train staff to work effectively with transfer students, create transfer centers on the community college level to help student with the transfer process, improve financial resources, and create transfer-friendly credit acceptance policies for students to know what is expected of them to graduate. Laanan (2001) emphasized the difficult process transfer experience upon arrival and the importance of realistic expectations:

Transfer students are likely to experience a complex adjustment process—academically, socially, and psychologically—because of the environmental differences between two-and four-year institutions. “Having an awareness of the expectations of the four-year school will facilitate a transfer student’s successful transition and ultimate success in the completion of a bachelor’s degree (p. 11).

Much of the research on transfer students focuses on their adjustment to the four-year college environment and does not include what it takes to succeed to graduate. The transfer student population demonstrates different needs and may require different services and support to graduate from a four-year institution.

Commuter and transfer student needs do not differ greatly because of the proclivity of transfer students to live off-campus. Commuter and transfer students seek meaningful college student involvement and educationally-beneficial opportunities from peers and faculty members, but these experiences inevitably look different from those sought by traditionally-aged, full-time, residential undergraduate as a result of their

limited time on-campus. The academic environment becomes the focus of these students' experience and the experience must serve to provide both academic and social fulfillment to these student populations. An examination of success strategies that work for transfer students must integrate their needs as commuter students.

Engaging Student Life

One purpose of higher education is to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and developmental opportunities to become successful, contributing adults. How institutions offer these opportunities is of critical importance to understanding the quality of the undergraduate student experience. How students choose to engage their college community predicts student satisfaction, and ultimately, retention. Chickering and Gamson (1987), through extensive research, found seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education, which serve as one of the best known set of student engagement predictors: frequent and deep student and faculty interaction, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, increased time on task, high expectations, and respect the talents and learning styles of all students in the classrooms. These principles have become the cornerstone of undergraduate quality. Student engagement measures how students spend their time in college and what they gain from educationally beneficial activities during their undergraduate experience. Kuh (as cited in National Survey of Student Engagement (2008) Annual Results report stated that:

Engagement ... requires a campus environment in which educators are actively involved in asking questions about the experience of their students, talking together about the impact of that experience on what the students know and can do, demanding more of themselves and their students, digging deeper, trying new

approaches, asking why and how, and always learning from their own experience as educators” (p. 4).

It is the institution’s responsibility to provide opportunities for these significant learning and developmental experiences to all students regardless where their students began their postsecondary education.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), launched in 1999, evaluates how students participate in programs and activities that promote student learning and development (NSSE, 2009). This survey is used by more than 1200 four-year institutions now and drives institutional decision-making about policies, programs and practices that improve the undergraduate’s educational experience. This important survey has identified issues with transfer students in results from past years as consistently disappointing; they are under-engaged at their institution of choice. Overall, as reported in 2008, NSSE found that transfer students who were surveyed as college seniors, felt disconnected and engaged with their college campuses to a significantly lesser degree than their native student counterparts on four of the five categorical measures. They report less interaction with faculty, a less supportive campus environment, less active and collaborative learning opportunities, and fewer enriching educational experiences (NSSE, 2008).

For many transfer students, the orientation they receive and how welcomed they feel by their new campus community sets the tone for their engagement. Orientation programs around the country differ for transfer students. Some institutions combine freshmen and transfer students into one orientation program or offer online orientation. Some colleges and universities offer comprehensive programs for incoming students to

help them integrate on academic and social levels. Yet other institutions offer support for transfer students beyond orientation in the form of courses for a transfer student in his/her first semester to facilitate transfer student success by incorporating study skills, helping them manage stress, helping students getting involved with organizations, and meeting other transfer students (Lipka, 2008).

The responsibility for the level of transfer students' engagement in college does not solely fall on the institution. Transfer students, because of age, work, family or financial obligations, are less able to participate in college the way society and postsecondary institutions knows a traditional college student does. These students must find ways to engage the institutions they attend to meet their academic and social goals. Colleges and universities find ways to provide opportunities to transfer students that meet their needs and the schedules.

Student involvement. Explained simply, the more involved students become, the more they learn and the more likely they will be to complete college (Astin 1985, 1999). Astin (1985) offered a Theory of Involvement to describe how students learn in college and why students persist. Astin (1985, 1999) posited that the quantity and quality of student involvement is directly proportional to how much a student learns. In this model, the role of a college or university is to provide "... a wide variety of academic and social opportunities to become involved with new ideas, people and experiences" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 53). Students play the primary role in the involvement theory as they choose in which activities and opportunities to invest their time and to what degree they will engage in them. According to Astin (1985):

a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends a lot of time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. Conversely, an uninvolved student may neglect studies, spend little time on campus, abstain from extracurricular activities, and have little contact or other students (p. 134).

An uninvolved student, as Astin (1985) described, depicts the more traditional transfer and commuter student on today's college campuses who spends time on campus for class and academic purposes, commuting to campus and then leaves to work and take care of external obligations. With demographic shifts in higher education and more students taking a nontraditional route through postsecondary education, the question becomes, "Does Astin's (1985) theory of involvement fit the current profile of undergraduate students?" How do these "uninvolved" students learn and persist through their educational experience? As "uninvolved" students, are they learning less which is what Astin (1985) theorized?

What Astin (1993) found in longitudinal research on student involvement is that any form of student involvement during college positively impacts learning and student development. The number of hours students spent studying related directly to positive academic outcomes, such as self-reported increases in cognitive and affective skills, student retention, honors graduation, admission to graduate school and improved standardized test scores. Honors programs, studying abroad, internship programs, independent research, class presentations and essay exams proved to be educationally-beneficial experiences to students (Astin, 1993). Astin (1993) also identified student-to-

student interaction in and out of the classroom as the most powerful influence on personal and academic development. The positive effects of student-to-student interaction extended to development of leadership skills, improved problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. Peer group orientation impacts college students' value system, how students behave and their overall educational plans (Astin, 1993).

Student-faculty interaction serves another significant influence on a student's personal and academic development (Astin, 1985, 1993; Johnson, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The effects of this type of interaction positively impacts grade point average, degree completion and pursuit of advanced degrees, measures of personal and intellectual growth and self-rated abilities. Kuh and Hu (2001)'s findings supported Astin's (1985, 1999) conclusions, and additionally, found that student-faculty interaction encouraged student participation in educationally-beneficial activities. Two factors that negatively influence the impact of student-faculty interaction on student development are the amount of time faculty dedicate to research and scholarship, and how strongly the student perceives faculty to be focused on his or her development (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Kuh (1995) found that out-of-class experiences generally enhance students' abilities to think critically and improve organizational and interpersonal skills. Kuh (1995) also found that working off-campus does not always lead to negative student persistence. If working away from campus contributes to academic and personal goals, students are more likely to persist in college. However, institutions must intervene to help them understand the role of work in achieving their educational goals for improved persistence. To expand on the importance of out-of-class experiences, Townley et al.

(2013) found that for transfer students, the combination of high participation in activities and a strong sense of community lead to stronger academic performance compared to those students who had significant involvement and low sense of community. Evaluating a sense of community should be a direction of researchers to consider when studying transfer student persistence.

College students today face different challenges than their peers of decades past. Astin (1998) reviewed thirty years of first-year student responses to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program to get a sense for the changes in college student values, interests, and influences. These changes impact what and how colleges and universities create effective learning environments for their students. Astin (1998) found that students are increasingly concerned about how to pay for college. Students intended to work to help pay for their college expenses while they attend college. Increasing costs to attend college each year, coupled with the inability of federal financial aid to increase with college costs, means students will continue to be burdened with financial concern. Students also reported that they experienced more stress in their lives than previous generations of college students. They were more overwhelmed by their responsibilities; reported feeling more depressed, and gave themselves lower ratings when asked about the state of their emotional health. They also reported an increased desire to seek personal counseling to help manage their stress (Astin, 1998).

Research Limitations, Literature Gaps and Implications for Research

Despite the growing number of students who attend multiple institutions to complete their bachelor's degrees, there is generally less research conducted on this subset of new students to a college campus. Their perspectives contribute depth regarding

how new students perceive and acclimate to a new college or university community because of their comparative experience with at least one other institution. A substantial portion of existing research focuses on community college students who transfer to four-year institutions. The reason behind this emphasis stems from the people conducting the research; they are the community college institutional researchers and administrators who want to know how well their students have made the transition to four-year institutions. Research on students who began at four-year institutions and moved to a different institution is usually examined in the context of a subject base which includes no delineation among types of new transfer students. Large public four-year institutions are popular venues for transfer student research in part because of the substantial number of student subjects that arrive each semester on these campuses to the exclusion of students who choose to attend private or liberal arts college and universities.

Considering methodologies, data collected in transfer student research are typically quantitative and draw data from existing institutional information or survey methodology (Kozieracki, 2001). Qualitative research is limited and when it is used, preferred approaches are interviews and focus groups. Transfer student researchers frequently point to the specific limitation in their research the ability to generalize their results beyond the institution where the research was conducted. This lack of generalization speaks to the diversity of institutional missions, cultures, size, and levels of selectivity, program offerings and the types of transfer students who choose to enroll any given institution.

There is a scarceness of research on transfer student college life as it relates to student engagement and involvement. What research exists on college student life

focuses on the “traditional” college student experience of getting involved with student organizations, living-learning communities, access to faculty members both in and out of the classroom, and the benefits that living on campus provides considering access to resources and campus-wide cultural, intellectual, and social activities. Research on how transfer students, specifically, engage college life is critical to discovering what helps and what hinders transfer students’ success and persistence.

On student success and student persistence research, the limitations focus on the scope of populations studied historically. When Tinto (1975), for example, developed his theory of student departure, his subjects were first-year, male, white, traditionally-aged students. Times have changed, and our national undergraduate population reflects significant differences in student points of entry, gender, race/ethnicity, and age. Still lacking from the target subjects of research on student success and persistence are the transfer students. We need research that provides deeper focus on how transfer students make successful adjustments to a new institution environment and what promotes persistence to graduation. Two primary research questions are examined in this study to address this gap in research:

- 1) What factors facilitate successful transition to a new institution?
- 2) What key elements facilitate their transfer student persistence to graduation?

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

This qualitative, single-case study explored the prominent factors that impact transfer student success and persistence for students who remained at a four-year institution or graduated (“Persisters”) at the time of analysis and compared them to students who departed the institution before degree completion (“Non-Persisters”). Research was conducted at a small, private urban university in the Midwest to address the following questions:

- 1) What factors facilitate successful transition to a new institution?
- 2) For transfer students, what key elements facilitate their persistence to graduation?

Research Design

As mentioned above, this research is a single institutional case study. According to Yin’s (2009) rationale for selecting case study methodology, this research is a revelatory case, defined as a researcher’s “... opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon previously inaccessible to social science inquiry...” (p. 48). In the review of literature, there were no examples of published research using small, private urban institutions as primary research sites. The researcher had a unique opportunity to examine the transfer student phenomenon at this type of institution. The researcher held an official role at this institution working with transfer students directly and had complete access and permission to collect data from the relevant student population. The institution selected, “River Town University,” was the ideal choice for an exploratory study of this kind, because of the institution’s significant transfer student population—twenty-five percent of its undergraduate population enter as transfer students, and the institution

renewed commitment in 2008 to improving the experience of its transfer students and increasing its transfer student graduation rates.

In working with transfer students in an advisory role with a substantial percentage of them from the time they arrived at the university, the researcher developed a relationship with the students that encouraged them to talk candidly about their experiences. By making such a case selection, the institution was a sample of convenience; but for the purposes of this exploratory study, this level of access and insight students revealed about the transfer student experience outweighed the limitation of using a convenient sample.

This study used grounded theory in data analysis to generate a new theoretical framework. Using grounded theory in this study allowed the framework to emerge in building a theory of transfer student persistence. In the review of literature, there was a lack of transition, success and retention theories related or relevant to transfer students. Grounded theory was a natural choice for data analysis as its purpose is to “... build theory from data” reflecting transfer students’ experiences in the transfer process and while they remained enrolled at the four-year institution (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1). The grounded theory approach for data analysis provided a clearer understanding of what transfer students experience at multiple points in their college career at River Town University. With this readily-available student population, the researcher had the opportunity to continue, as grounded theory prescribes, to collect data as trends emerged in the data analysis. Existing theories by Vincent Tinto’s (1975, 1987) Theory of Student Departure, Bean’s (1980) Model of Student Attrition, and the expansion of the student

departure concept developed by Braxton et al. (2004) guided the development of a new theoretical framework about successful transfer student transition and persistence.

A qualitative design was selected to collect and analyze data to discover, from the participants' perspective, the most salient factors in their transition and progress toward an undergraduate degree. The procedures used through the data collection process include two sets of interviews conducted at separate points in transfer students' experience, interviews conducted shortly after their enrollment at a new institution (initial interviews), and interviews conducted after the students had completed at least one full semester of coursework to those who completed many semesters and were close to graduation (follow-up interviews). Based on an adapted version of the principles of grounded theory, questions for the initial interviews and the follow-up interviews were modified to address trends that emerged from previously-conducted interviews.

Sampling

This study was conducted at a small, private four-year Midwestern, urban institution with Carnegie classification Master's L: Master's Colleges and Universities (Carnegie Foundation, 2010). The university ("River Town University") has about 2,000 undergraduates and is predominantly a commuter campus, though most first-year students live in the residence halls. River Town University has a growing transfer student population (approximately 25% of its new students annually are transfers) and renewed its commitment to the transfer student experience in 2008. The researcher was also employed there and worked directly with the transfer students directly, which provided an ideal opportunity for access and in-depth research.

While the selection of the institution clearly was an opportunity sample, a purposeful sampling strategy was used to gain a greater understanding of the needs and issues of university transfer students. This university has approximately 200 incoming transfer students each year, with approximately 150 arriving for fall semester and 50 arriving for spring semester. In the time frame of the data collection, the average transfer student retention rate was lower than that of the average first-year population after two completing two semesters: 77% for transfer students and 80% for first-year students from 2008-2010. The transfer student population that participated in the study generally was representative of the whole transfer student population at River Town University with the exception of gender, credits in first semester and student class standing; study participants had greater representation from female students, students who did not reveal their race/ethnicity, students who took a full credit load, part-time students and students who arrived with junior standing. There were fewer students who held sophomore standing, and a slightly lower number of students of color as study participants. A summary of demographic information collected about the transfer student population and study participants from River Town University from Fall 2008-Fall 2010 can be found in Appendix A.

Researcher's Role

In 2006, River Town hired a retention consultant to identify ways to increase the university's retention efforts; among several, the results revealed one particular need: to better serve transfer students needs and improve the graduation rates of these students. In 2008, the researcher was hired as director of a newly-created office and was expected to develop programming, offer services, support students directly, and advocate for transfer

student needs throughout the university. The primary areas identified by this consultant for initial attention on transfer students were: credit articulation for the students' major and graduation requirements; fair policies for course articulation; students' understanding of financial aid packages; the transfer student orientation program; trouble navigating the decentralized services; and offices for student support at River Town.

With these charges, the researcher revamped the orientation program, developed student interviews (the initial interviews used in this study) to talk through their understanding of financial aid and degree evaluations and to address their specific questions and concerns through their first semester at the university. The researcher and an additional half-time graduate assistant in the office developed relationships with many of the transfer students through programming opportunities and became a resource for many of them when questions or issues arose. These relationships allowed the researcher to receive more honest and thorough responses in the follow-up interview process in this research study.

The researcher's role as director and creator of the transfer student program at River Town University gave her a unique opportunity to study these students through the large database of information developed since the office began in 2008. With the university's permission to use all of the existing information about transfer students from the institutional database and other relevant data sources, the researcher gathered demographic information and student interview notes to develop the follow-up interview questions. This researcher was granted unparalleled access to River Town's institutional database to inform this study but also to dedicate time analyzing the data collected by transfer student services office since its inception. As a small office serving twenty-five

percent of the undergraduate population, there was little time to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data acquired. Student participants were assigned subject numbers to eliminate any bias or additional insight the researcher may have had into a particular student's experience when seeing that student's name.

Selection Criteria

Subjects eligible to participate in this research were students who transferred to River Town University between September 2008 and September 2010 in Fall Semester, Winter Term (January term) and Spring Semesters. There were 476 possible student subjects for inclusion from the initial interviews (conducted in the first few weeks of the semester after a student's arrival to the university). One-hundred seventy-eight students were eligible to participate in the follow-up interviews (conducted semesters after they arrived at the university).

Data Collection

Much of the data used for this study was collected as part of the researcher's job responsibilities at the case study institution, and thus constitutes a secondary data source. Using several data sources, including student interview notes, surveys and focus groups, the researcher developed a more intensive interview protocol to examine for transition experiences with a smaller number of students. The interview protocol was developed primarily as a research instrument for this study, and was approved by the university at which the research is being carried out. The researcher received the university's permission to retrieve student demographic information, as well as information previously collected in the university's database regarding the students' interactions with the Retention and Transfer Student Services office, to use in this study. This research

examined student demographic information to determine any differences in previous institution type, number of credits earned prior to arrival, number of previous institutions attended, student's age, and role as parent among other factors. The researcher also collected individual student persistence data for these student populations from the institutional database.

Initial Individual Interviews

In the initial individual interviews, students were asked to complete individual meetings (or initial interviews) with staff in the Retention and Transfer Student Services office. (The interviews were part of the students' orientation program to the new university). The purpose of these meetings was to meet individually and in-person with new transfer students to address any specific needs or concerns and to help the student develop a connection with staff in the office for future assistance. These interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 15 and 45 minutes, depending on the number of questions students asked, or concerns revealed by the students, and were conducted between September 2008 and December 2010. The meetings took place in the individual offices of staff in Retention and Transfer Student Services. The offices were enclosed, which offered privacy for students to discuss sensitive issues with staff members, when needed.

During the initial interviews, staff asked students a series of questions about that addressed how the students experienced their transition, how classes were going, whether they had any questions about their financial aid package, or questions about credit articulation. The interviews were designed to be conversational and allowed for students to ask the interviewer questions as the interview progressed. The responses students gave

provided the data for this case study. The questions the interviewer asked in Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 were not as extensive or structured as those asked beginning Fall 2009 to Fall 2010. The seventeen questions developed for Fall 2009 were based on patterns of questions and concerns that arose in the initial interviews in Fall 2008 and Spring 2009, with additional questions regarding expectations for their college experience, expectations of the university, what they saw as their greatest challenge in the first semester, and their academic and social integration. The set of interview questions have remained the same for the Fall 2009, Spring 2010 and Fall 2010 subjects. The initial interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

Students completed these meetings within the first 10 weeks of the semester. The interviewers took handwritten notes on the subject's responses to questions, as well as additional comments or questions that arose during the meeting. The notes were then typed and entered into the institutional database: 387 interviews were conducted over the course of the five semesters included in this study. From all of these interviews, the researcher randomly sampled the subject pool to obtain initial interview data for analysis.

Follow-Up Interviews

Using past university-administered survey responses, answers to questions from the initial interviews and past transfer student focus group results conducted by the university, the researcher shaped questions to use in the follow-up interviews. In November 2009, 178 students who began at the university in Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 received email invitations to meet with the researcher to participate in the follow-up interviews. In the interviews, transfer students were asked to discuss their academic, social, personal and financial experiences as well as to ask for their opinions about how

the university could enhance services and programs for transfer students. Fifteen interviews were completed in November and December 2009 as a result of the first email invitation for participation. A second request for students to meet was sent mid-December 2009, but there was a delay until April in conducting these interviews with the students until the researcher returned to the university from maternity leave. Four interviews were completed in April and May 2009 as a result of the second request. 20 students responded to the email request to participate in the interviews and 19 students followed through with the interviews to completion. One student agreed to meet but did not show up for the scheduled appointment.

The follow-up interviews were structured and lasted between 20 minutes and 45 minutes depending on the depth of the answers students provided and the necessity for additional questions to clarify points students made. After the first four interviews, the researcher added three questions about general finances and their impact on students' success, because it had emerged as a concern in previously-conducted interviews. Finances play a crucial role in students' ability to succeed and persist (Joo, Durband, & Grable, 2008). There were 31 open- and close-ended interview questions to identify their academic experiences, connections at the university, support, and motivation (see Appendix C for the follow-up interview protocol).

After students reviewed and signed the consent form, the researcher explained the study's purpose and informed the student participants they could skip any question asked. Subjects began the interview by writing their responses to eight demographic questions on the interview protocol prior to the beginning of the interview. Based on the initial data analysis, as grounded theory prescribes, questions in the remaining 11 interviews

included more inquiry into students' support system and their impressions about what made them persist.

The interviews were conducted in an enclosed, quiet office in the department serving transfer students on campus to ensure ease of location and to provide privacy for the subjects to share personal experiences with the researcher. The follow-up interviews were recorded digitally to ensure sound quality. The interviewer took handwritten notes to back up the digital recording in case of failure. The interview recordings were professionally transcribed.

Data Analysis

For the initial interviews and follow-up interviews, the general guidelines for grounded theory as identified in Corbin and Strauss (2008) were followed. The initial interviews and follow-up interviews served as the focal point for the qualitative analysis. Table 3.1 indicates the total number of students who completed initial interviews by semester at the university.

Table 3.1

Number of Initial Interviews Completed by Semester

Semester	Initial Interviews Conducted
Fall 2008	91
Spring 2009	40
Fall 2009	84
Spring 2010	35
Fall 2010	137
Total	387

Because of time limitations, inclusion of all available initial interviews was not realistic for this study. Random sampling was used to select a more manageable number of 29 interviews for analysis from the available 387 interviews. Students who completed follow-up interviews were automatically added to the initial interview sample to give depth to the results. There were 13 students who have completed both initial and follow-up interviews through data collection at the time of analysis. To select additional students to include from the initial interviews, a small percentage (7.75%) of the initial interviews each semester were chosen by a random number generator to achieve balance in interview representation by semester. By semester, each student who completed the initial interviews was assigned a confidential number to protect the student's identity, but still allow the researcher to utilize the student's demographic information to inform the study. Figure 1 shows the numbers of subjects who completed initial individual interviews from data collection to post-data analysis.

Figure 3.1

Initial Interview Subject Breakdown

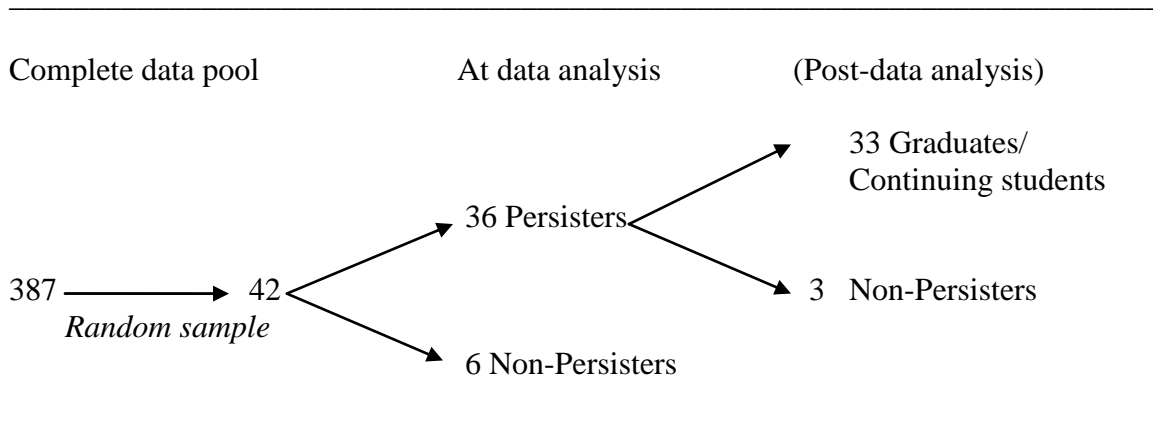
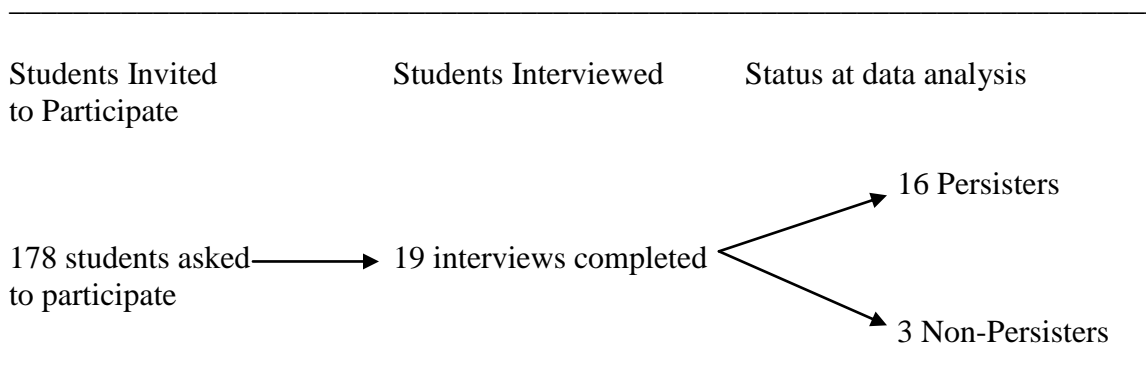


Figure 3.2 shows the numbers of students who were invited to participate in the follow-up interviews, completed the interview, and student outcomes at the time of data analysis.

Figure 3.2

Follow-up Interview Subject Breakdown



As indicated, grounded theory was used to enhance the interview questions asked to reach the point of saturation with data collection. To begin my qualitative analysis, major coding categories were created (open coding) based on key factors identified by the existing student retention frameworks of Tinto (1975), Bean (1980) and Braxton, et al.(2004) (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell 2007). From there, additional broad categories were developed as needed for analysis of the data.

From the initial and follow-up interviews, the constant comparison approach of analysis in grounded theory as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008) was used. Each interview was compared to the other like categories of data for similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Once open coding was completed, the primary categories were examined and subcategories were developed. Finally, the categories were reviewed to discover any interrelationships within the model.

Protecting Subjects' Privacy

To protect subjects' privacy, several measures were taken to keep students' identities confidential; participants in the interviews were assigned numbers to protect their responses from direct identification. Notes and demographic information from the interviews have been separated from student identities with a numeric coding system. Subjects who participated in the follow-up interviews, in anticipation of inclusion in this study were asked to sign an informed consent form where information about how their identities would be kept private was shared.

Digital audio recordings (iTunes voice memos) were taken for the follow-up interviews. These recordings were immediately downloaded to the researcher's password-protected computer. On that computer, the recordings were identified with a date and time. Once the computer download was complete, the information was transferred to CD where the recordings were identified by with specific subject numbers and no indication of recording date and time for the interviews. The hard data (CDs, lists of focus group and subject-student numbering systems, handwritten notes from the interviews and the focus groups) have been placed in a locked file cabinet; the researcher possesses the only copy of the cabinet keys.

Limitations

Several limitations exist in this research study through the methodology chosen. First, the initial interviews were designed originally to inform the work of the researcher's office about transfer student needs and experiences. The initial interview protocol was not designed specifically with a formal research study in mind. The data collection tools were developed while getting to know transfer student needs from a practical perspective. The interview protocol was revised as needed as information arose

about students' experiences that the office and the university needed to further explore. Additionally, other office staff conducted initial interviews. The style in which each staff person asked questions and followed up with questions regarding the students' responses varied and posed possible inconsistencies into the initial set of interviews.

A significant limitation of this study is the focus on one institution as the site of the research. Using one institution can provide challenges to the ability to generalize the findings to different institution types, college cultures and climates, academic caliber, geographic area or the program structure to replicate this type of study.

CHAPTER 4: TRANSFER STUDENTS UP CLOSE

Introduction

To begin my analysis, in Chapter 4, I will share four student stories that provide a context for the diverse and complex experiences of transfer students in their transition to a new institution and their persistence at that institution¹. Chapter 5 will continue with an aggregate analysis of factors and their influence on students' transition to a new university environment and their persistence to graduation.

In Chapter 4, elements from many of the interviews conducted are reflected in these detailed students' stories. The first two students completed their degrees at River Town University and the final two students withdrew from the university before graduating. These particular stories were chosen because they represent the complexities involved with any transfer student's experience; they preview and personalize the factors that emerged in this study that facilitate or hinder student success and persistence, which will be discussed in depth in Chapter 5:

- Jason is a “traditional” student who made the decision to transfer to River Town during his first semester at a four-year college. As a student who persisted, Jason experienced some minor “bumps” during his enrollment at River Town, but managed to work out the obstacles that emerged. He encountered minor issues in the transfer process, worked closely with his academic advisor to create an effective academic plan to meet his needs, used faculty and staff to help him establish himself at River Town, balanced his out-of-class obligations well by prioritizing his education and preparing thoughtfully for his future career using his college experiences.

¹ All names have been changed to protect student identities.

- Amanda is high-achieving older student who transferred with several years of experience at two different community colleges. Amanda's high academic standards and determination to complete her degree drove her success. Despite personal financial hurdles, Amanda received scholarships and grants to fund her education, making finances a lesser concern while she pursued her degree. She worked closely with faculty to efficiently navigate the university environment and engaged intentionally with experiences that supplemented her scholarly work.
- Jessica is also an older nomadic student, who after completing course work at three different colleges, attended River Town for five semesters, but distracted by significant health concerns, left making little academic progress (due to course performance and reduced course loads), expressed significant financial concerns; and finally, left the university for self-disclosed financial reasons.
- Celia is a "traditional" residential student who arrived at this institution with no articulated credits from her previous institution and who tried to discover her identity as a student and as a young adult at River Town, ultimately at the expense of her academic work and a traditional college career.

Jason

Jason was a full-time, white student who transferred from a four-year public university in the same state after his first semester. A traditionally-aged student, he went directly to college from [a suburban] high school, but left his first institution (State U) because he believed it was not a good fit for him. According to Jason, he "... did not feel the atmosphere was appropriate for what [he] wanted to obtain at the college" (Participant #2F, personal communication, November 30, 2009). He also believed there

were more opportunities in the large urban area where this university is located compared to what was offered near his previous university's location. He originally considered River Town University in his first college search but decided not to apply. When it became apparent that State U was not living up to his expectations, he did not look at any other institutions besides River Town. He remained a residential student who lived in a residence hall during his college years, but worked 20-25 hours per week off-campus.

In the transfer articulation process, almost all of Jason's previously-earned credits from State U were accepted. He was thrilled, because he had anticipated that a few credits would not transfer because of the institutionally-specific nature of the courses. The financial aid process, however, was more difficult for him to negotiate. He was unsure of the steps he needed to complete the process and thus, missed some critical elements in his transition to the new university. He had a hold on his account early in his first semester and had to wait for a loan to be processed to pay the remainder of his tuition bill several weeks after the university semester commenced. From Jason's perspective, this delayed resolution of his financial obligations to the university hindered his transition to River Town, though he gave no examples of the direct impact on him.

Financial aid was not the only area that created a struggle for Jason as he transitioned to a new university. Between a heavy work schedule and the rigor of the courses he was taking, Jason's grade point average dropped in his first semester at River Town. He estimated that his second semester performance would not show improvement over his first semester, either. Even though Jason took the right steps to improve his academic work by seeking professors' help outside of class, his grades did not change. Additionally, Jason became actively involved with three student organizations where he

quickly took on leadership roles. His co-curricular involvement, along with his rigorous work schedule and high course expectations contributed to his inability to improve his academic performance to the level at which he performed at State U.

Jason arrived at River Town with one major in mind, but quickly decided that he wanted to add a Political Science major and a Legal Studies minor. The impetus for this decision was to expand his career options because he was uncertain about what he wanted to do after graduation. Although Jason hit some planning bumps in his first semester, he stayed on track to graduation through careful monitoring of his credits and their application to graduation and major requirements. Jason had a good relationship with his faculty advisor and continued to receive assistance from him as needed throughout his time at River Town.

In the classroom, Jason did not feel singled out as a transfer student and met many new people through his courses. In addition, he quickly became involved outside of class. He participated in a music group and held leadership roles on the residential hall council and as a student orientation leader. Jason described his student orientation leadership role and the group of students in it as most influential on his educational experience by creating "...more positivity and more secureness in staying at the university" (Participant 2F, personal communication, November 30, 2009). He believed his involvement with this group and the people in it had a positive impact on his classroom performance which helped him persist at River Town.

In his quest to achieve his college degree, his parents played significant support roles to help him achieve his educational goals. Beyond his family, he believed he was his own greatest supporter because he chose to be in college and to stay in college. He set

goals for himself both in and outside the classroom; Jason expected himself to complete academic work with above average grades, remain involved on-campus, and to gain both curricular and extracurricular knowledge to prepare him for his career. His motivation to complete his degree was extrinsic, stemming from his desire to get a good job and “make a lot of pay” (Participant #2F, personal communication, November 30, 2009).

The greatest obstacle to Jason’s success was time management. His job off-campus involved a 30-minute commute each way in addition to working about 25 hours each week. When he had free time, he spent it studying, hanging out with friends, and attending academic lectures, sporting events and campus social activities; he used his time to create a well-balanced college experience for himself. He also continued to struggle with the diversity of opinions that he encountered both in and out of his classes. This aspect of the campus culture was very different from his previous personal experiences at State U.

Jason described his classmates and peers as having played a significant role in his persistence at this university. He said “... if I didn’t have any connections with people here, that’s a good reason to leave or to not want to be here” (Participant #2F, personal communication, November 30, 2009). He named the transfer student services staff and his student leadership group supervisor as significant contributors to his persistence as a student by serving as safe places he sought to discuss anything freely.

Reflecting on his experience at River Town, he wished he would not have chosen to transfer in the middle of the year. The transition was difficult for him both academically and socially. While he did not regret coming to River Town, Jason had lingering questions about what would have happened in his remaining college years if he

had chosen a different institution or considered more colleges when he had made the decision to transfer. In sum, he left the interview with as many or more questions about his choices and future as he articulated at the point of transfer.

Jason graduated in May 2012 with a bachelor's degree with a double major and a minor and is currently working in his major field.

Amanda

Amanda was a full-time, white honors student who transferred from a two-year community college. She was a non-traditional student who had completed two years of coursework at two community colleges prior to applying to River Town. She left her previous institution because she took as many courses as she could in her major interest. She also relocated to the metropolitan area where River Town University is located to work full-time in management for an unnamed company. She was laid off from her job and after searching for a new job, realized that she had little chance of finding a position she wanted without completing a bachelor's degree. Unemployment and her job search precipitated her decision to return to college to earn a four-year degree to gain skills to expand her employment opportunities.

Amanda's work load was not significant, working between 11 and 15 hours per week off-campus, but her home was a great distance from campus that required a commute by car. In addition to working, she had an internship at a local non-profit organization where she worked on developing skills in the education field, a career she hoped to pursue. Overall, during her time at River Town, she was essentially a "commuter student." She estimated that she spent six hours on campus per week outside of classes; this time was usually between classes.

At the time of the interview, Amanda was on track with both graduation and major requirements and anticipated graduating on the timeline she had when she came here. She stayed on track by taking a full course load each semester and “being very determined” (Participant #11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009). She also made sure to look ahead to see what needed to be done and met regularly with her academic advisor to discuss what she needed to graduate. Her major had not changed from her intentions when she entered this institution.

Amanda’s student experience was affected by her precarious financial status. As mentioned earlier, she lost a full-time job before starting at River Town and decided not to work in her first semester. Her academic performance began strong, but her financial situation forced her to make a difficult choice to return to work, knowing that working would detract from the time she could devote to her courses. From her need to return to work in her second semester, she experienced a slight decline in grades and academic performance. She described the decline in her grades second semester to her need to find work to cover living expenses. Amanda received a substantial scholarship and grants to minimize her out-of-pocket expenses for her education, but she discussed having difficulties paying her bills and managing monthly living expenses. Her parents helped her when she was unsure how to make ends meet, but on a case-by-case basis. Even into her third semester at the university, she still struggled financially; she was unsure about how to manage her mounting expenses month by month. In addition to existing bills, she had unexpected car repairs—and her car was essential to her ability to get to class and the library.

Amanda reported a high level of stress that these challenges brought to her life, and pointed to the constraints that they placed on her. Social expenses were not part of her budget and she almost always turned down social engagements with friends because she could not afford to go out. In her previous full-time position, she had extra money each month to spend as she pleased. She said prioritizing her education and having limited income taught her the difference between things she needs and things she wants.

Relationships with key faculty members were critical to her success at this institution. She described particularly strong relationships with her academic (faculty) advisor and with her honors project faculty supervisor. In addition to these key mentors, Amanda believes her professors challenged her to think deeper and more critically about the field material she encountered.

The classroom climate, on the other hand, presented more of a challenge to this student. As a non-traditional student, she felt her life experience was devalued by her classmates. She had been married, then divorced, held a full-time management position, and owned a home. She felt her classmates were not interested in the kind of diversity that she represented, and as a result, she felt isolated. While she did not believe her classmates intentionally isolated her, she thought their unfamiliarity with her life experience distinguished her experience at her previous colleges, where being “non-traditional” served as points of connection with other classmates. She attributed the different experiences at each institution to the critical difference between a more traditional, largely residential four-year institution and a two-year institution. Her sense of disconnection from her classmates made her question her institutional choice. However, she was satisfied with her courses and the faculty as well as the financial

support she received to pursue her education. In the end, the academic experience, the support she received from faculty, and the financial assistance to complete her degree outweighed her desire for social acceptance.

Beyond the classroom climate, course expectations often seemed trivial and unexciting to Amanda, a talented honors student: “busy work” is how she described some of the class preparation and assignments (Participant #11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009). She believed her perspective stemmed from being a more mature student and the need to value the time she put into her courses. She shared her belief that she used her time efficiently and did not need help with the busy work to stay on task in some of her courses.

Amanda criticized the pedagogy she often encountered in her courses as “problem identification without proposed solutions” (Participant #11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009). She believed the need to balance the critical nature of class dialogues and evaluative material with the development of ideas to discover resolutions to the issues that arose was missing: “... I feel like there is not the balance that ... now we have torn this apart, how do we put it back together; how do we create change, how do we make things happen” (Participant #11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009). Her perceived dissonance between constant critique which was expected in the course and her internal desire to create change obviously impacted how she approached her work in the courses. Though she articulated strong disapproval for much of the teaching philosophy she encountered, she acknowledged the intrinsic value of the teaching pedagogy.

For Amanda, her greatest educational experiences came at three different points in her River Town years: an internship she held at a local non-profit agency; a course where she developed her own research ideas; and her honors project. She shared details of the personal challenges she faced and what she learned about herself while working on her honors project. She talked about the struggles with motivation she encountered as she worked on the project. At one point, she decided to give up on it and then reflected that tended to abandon projects, experiences, or people when things became difficult. This time, she made a conscious effort to “wade through it a little bit and come out on the other side feeling a little bit stronger because [she] stuck it out” (Participant #11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009). She described feeling too much pressure from herself and from her advisor to finish, but said suddenly “one day [she] woke up and [she] was like now [she’s] ready to do this again” (Participant #11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009). Amanda’s epiphany helped her gain perspective about herself and perseverance, which are critical lessons for life.

Amanda was highly motivated to succeed and identified herself as her greatest supporter, though she also described her faculty advisor and the staff in financial aid as instrumental in her success. Given her previous life circumstances, her self-reliance is no surprise. She faced challenges she believed many of her classmates were years from encountering. These experiences (unemployment, divorce, and lose of home) gave her pause to identify what mattered most to her.

Amanda’s self-awareness brought her to River Town to complete a degree whose significance grew in importance to her personal and financial fulfillment. She learned to do the best she could in any situation. She shared that she used to expect herself to do

“everything perfectly” but that age and experience have taught her the best way to handle expectations was to give your best effort, rather than seeking perfection (Participant #11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009). Her drive to complete her degree came from the discovery that a bachelor’s degree was a necessity to be competitive in her field. Without a bachelor’s degree, she was not able to secure another job of interest. She described this experience as the “final motivating factor” in her decision to return to college (Participant #11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009). She felt immense pride in making it through her first year, for an honored department scholarship, and for the work she had completed on her honors project.

She graduated in May 2010. At the time of the interview, she had planned to seek work in the non-profit sector. She had been working on a grant through a program where she volunteered. Once she received her bachelor’s degree, they hoped to employ her formally and she looked forward to that opportunity because she truly enjoyed the agency to which she gave her time. For several years after graduation, Amanda worked part-time for the agency where she volunteered and now works full-time as an English Language Instructor for adult immigrants.

Jessica

Jessica’s college journey began long before she attended River Town University. Over the course of six years, she attended three postsecondary institutions prior to River Town: a four-year college in a different part of the country and two local community colleges. She made the return to a four-year college because she wanted to complete a bachelor’s degree. She chose River Town because of small class sizes and the emphasis on faculty engagement. It is obvious from her collegiate history that Jessica was a slightly

older, non-traditional student. Jessica also identified as white and was a commuter student.

Jessica initially started as a part-time student during her initial transition into the university. She did not take a January term course to help make up for getting a slow start credit-wise in fall semester. Students (particularly transfer students) at River Town often use January term to help them “catch up” on credits, but Jessica did not take advantage of this opportunity (Participant #12F, personal communication, December 10, 2009).

Though she was considered a full-time student by River Town’s credit definitions, she took the minimum number of credits to maintain full-time status throughout several semesters at the university.

At the time of the interview, she did not believe she was on track with graduation requirements. She revealed that she had learning disabilities and medical concerns that interfered with her credit progression toward a degree. Despite her documented learning disability, Jessica added a minor, Education, to her fields of study after she arrived. Despite her slow progress, she still anticipated graduating in the next four years, which was consistent with the initial time frame she anticipated when she arrived at River Town. Jessica had some problems transferring credits in math. Instead of resolving the issue through articulation, the student chose to take another math course required for her minor. Ultimately because Jessica left the institution, her decision not to appeal denied transfer credits did not matter. Of particular importance, Jessica attended River Town for five semesters and withdrew for financial reasons even though at the time of the interview, she fully intended to complete her degree at this institution.

Not surprisingly, Jessica reported that her grades were lower in her first semester. Jessica indicated several reasons for her lackluster performance: first, being at a new institution and “getting to know how things are done...” and second, “... [she] wasn’t taking classes that [she] was particularly interested in” (Participant #12F, personal communication, December 10, 2009). When asked further about her lack of interest in the courses, she explained that in fact, the classes were interesting but she did not test well in them. She also got very ill for several weeks during her first semester. After her first semester though, her course performance improved. She attributed this positive change to excellent teachers who “explained things well” and to a high level of interest in courses in her chosen field” (Participant #12F, personal communication, December 10, 2009). Her most significant educational experiences came from the relevant assignments and skill development she received in her major and minor courses. She could see the clear connection between what she learned in the classroom and how she would use this knowledge, as an aspiring teacher, in her future classroom. Despite her reported engagement in the classroom, Jessica demonstrated early signs of academic struggle by withdrawing from one course each semester, according to her internal transcript, though she did not discuss the reasons for these withdrawals in the interview itself.

Jessica relied on her academic faculty advisor to help her plan her academic career. Initially, she was paired with an advisor with whom she did not develop a strong relationship and chose to elect a new advisor for assistance during the remainder of her time at River Town. Jessica believed her success was hindered by the requirements she had placed on her to obtain prior approval of her choices for course registration from multiple advisors. (Jessica had to use multiple advisors because of her learning disability

needs.) As a commuter student who lived a great distance from campus, her time on campus was limited to about two hours a day between classes. To meet with several advisors about course registration was problematic to schedule because these meetings conflicted with the time she needed to participate in required group projects.

Her final decision to choose a new primary advisor improved her academic experience greatly; her relationship with her academic advisor became much stronger after the switch. While she said she did not have any significant relationship with any other faculty members, she described faculty's direct role in her success by "... being available and understanding, willing to work with you ..." (Participant #12F, personal communication, December 10, 2009). Outside of the university, her family provided the greatest support to her in completing her education. Despite the strength of her support system, Jessica faced great challenges which ultimately overshadowed her desire to complete her college degree at River Town.

Of herself, Jessica expected to learn a lot and do her best. She focused on her desire to become a teacher to keep her motivated. The greatest obstacles she encountered were her battles with mental health issues. She used the disability services office to assist her with her courses. She also worked with a personal therapist regularly to address her concerns. Despite these challenges, she considered herself very successful and described her grades as her greatest accomplishment. When asked about her classmates' role in her ability to persist, she said they kept her connected to campus though she did not socialize with them outside of class.

Finances played a significant role in her ability to remain at this institution and in the end, were the reason she decided to leave the university. She just could not afford to

remain enrolled any longer. One of the primary financial issues she encountered regarded state grant eligibility. Even though she took enough credits to be considered a full-time student with twelve credits per semester, she needs to take sixteen credits per semester to receive state grant money. Because of her learning disability, she only could manage twelve. Jessica was confident she could pay her educational expenses but she struggled to manage her personal expenses. She was only able to work about six hours per week and handle her academic courses. With a long commute to campus, it was difficult to stretch her earnings to cover the costs of gas and food. The stress these concerns presented became too much for her to continue at River Town.

Celia

The final narrative shares Celia's story. She was a full-time, traditionally-aged, African-American female residential student who occasionally took a part-time student course load. Celia was born and raised in the local area and decided to attend a community college after high school. She did not have the type of experience she expected and left her former college because she did not like the social atmosphere. She felt disconnected and realized her need for social connection. She decided that a more traditional college setting was what she desired. Even though she attended a community college and took several courses there, she opted not to transfer any of those completed courses to River Town. Ultimately, however, she withdrew from River Town after a rocky career as a student and accumulating financial problems.

Celia was not a "typical transfer student" when she arrived. River Town University only enrolls a few students each year who arrive at the university with no credits to transfer, but those students often come from another four-year college (not a

community college) and withdrew from the university before completing any courses. Celia said she chose not to transfer any of her previous credits to this institution primarily because she wanted to take the courses again or take different courses that fit in her graduation plan. She commented that she was glad to have repeated courses similar to what she took at her previous institution because she thought the courses at River Town were better. She still had the option to transfer her courses and she planned to consider it if it helped her complete university requirements for graduation.

Because of her desire for a strong social connection at River Town, new student orientation was critical in her transition to River Town. She learned about co-curricular opportunities (e.g. student organizations service learning and study abroad programs) in which she soon participated. She also appreciated the social emphasis for meeting other new students whom she would see in classes or befriend. She reflected the strong impact that one event, orientation, had on her social experiences at this institution. Within the first few weeks after her arrival, she became an active student in several student organizations where she soon held leadership roles. She dedicated a significant amount of time to these student activities, sometimes at the expense of completing academic work. In addition, she said she attended numerous events focused on social justice or in the fine arts on campus beyond her regular student involvement.

Despite the positive transition she shared about her involvement on campus, her social transition was not without problems. As mentioned earlier, she was a residential student. She, like many traditionally-aged college students, expected to have a great relationship with their roommate. Celia's roommate spent most of her time at her family's home instead of in their room, which greatly impacted Celia's ability and desire

to meet other people. She said she “floundered ... and said she “found myself leaving campus a lot because I was scared... I know that it’s probably really, really hard for people to force themselves to go to things ...” (Participant #18F, personal communication, April 29, 2010). Celia had to work harder than she expected to meet and connect with others. It wasn’t until she decided to take a spring break service learning trip that things started to feel more comfortable. Once she had that level of comfort, she became actively involved in student life on campus. Celia was particularly proud of the leadership position she held to coordinate and execute one of the service spring break trips that were so critical to her own initial engagement at this institution:

I think my biggest step was taking the spring break trip. And then after that everything else came much easier to go to things. And I’m sure if I would have had a roommate who was more involved on campus or just there I would have had a better transition. But once I had that initial kick, everything came perfectly for me (Participant #18F, personal communication, April 29, 2010).

She talked about having become heavily involved with community outreach programs at the time of the interview. She noted that her peers (self-described as her friends) played a significant role in her persistence at the institution. In the end, the support of peers and others was not enough to compensate for the struggles she encountered in the classroom.

At the time of the interview, Celia believed she was on track with her graduation and major requirements. After her arrival, she decided to add a major [Religion] and a minor [Art History] to her original plan of majoring in English because of her enjoyment of the courses she had taken in those fields. Choosing to major in two areas and minor in one area, she had to plan for her remaining time at the university carefully to ensure she

could meet the requirements in each subject area as well as graduation requirements. One strategy she used was to take winter (January) term and summer courses to help her meet with these requirements.

Celia relied heavily on the expertise and advice given by her faculty advisor about courses to take and the proper timing of courses. She said her relationship with her faculty adviser was vital to her success: “She just makes me feel so comfortable ... I come in and tell her all of my plans and we get everything done and then she’s like, ‘How are you?’ and we can have a conversation” (Participant #18F, personal communication, April 29, 2010). She worked closely with her adviser to discuss the best course of action in each situation where she encountered significant academic difficulty. In addition to her strong relationship with her faculty adviser, she talked about the relationships she has developed with other faculty members being critical to her success and integration at this institution. She enjoyed talking to faculty members about school or her stress, seeking encouragement from them when needed and seeing them at various campus events.

Regarding her academic performance, Celia reported her grade point average remained similar to her grades at her community college and stayed the same throughout her first two semesters at this university. She admitted that she did not look at her grade point average very often. She claimed her grade point average was above a 3.0 when in fact, there were few semesters where she achieved a B average. The statement she made about not looking at her grades often was a tell-tale sign of lack of focus on her academic performance. She was unprepared to handle the courses she took, as evidenced by the pattern of withdrawing from courses late in the semester and ultimately, her lack of academic progress resulted in her academic dismissal from the university. She

successfully completed only 2/3 of the credits attempted in her six semesters at the university. She appealed her suspension and was reinstated as a student. Immediately following her reinstatement, she promptly took a formal leave of absence for three semesters before she withdrew from the River Town for financial reasons. In this state, students were eligible for 9 semesters of state grant. She had used at least six semesters of grant eligibility without a possible graduation in her sights. After leaving River Town, she enrolled in a local trade school and completed a certificate program there.

Despite her struggles with academic performance, she truly enjoyed the discussion-based nature of courses, and the types of books her professors chose in her major stimulated her learning. She appreciated the critical analysis she was expected to provide in her classes. She also believed the small community with “tight-knit” social groups contributed to her positive experience (Participant #18F, personal communication, April 29, 2010). Though it took her some time to find her social group, once she found her social niche she was very happy at River Town.

Celia discussed the critical role of the support she got from outside the college and her own motivation as essential to her pursuit of a college degree. She had a mentor on whom she relied for advice and encouragement that was a mother-figure to her. She motivated herself to complete her degree because she had a strong desire to express social justice through writing or art. She intended to write novels but also work in the non-profit sector to educate others on social justice. She envisioned what this degree would do for her professionally, but spent too much time dreaming about the next step in life and not focusing on the practicality required to realize her dreams. Overall, she felt she was putting her time both in and out of the classroom to good use.

If she could change anything about her experience at the institution, she would not have “messed up” two of her classes (Participant #18F, personal communication, April 29, 2010). With one of the first courses she took in her major interest, the class proved too difficult for her at that point which caused her to question her academic ability. As a result, she did not do well and failed the course. The other course she failed did not fit her learning style. She acknowledged some of her academic difficulty to the interviewer but did not reveal the depth of the difficulty she experienced that led to her dismissal from River Town.

Finances played a significant role in her ability to remain at this institution. She expressed concern for the amount of student loan debt she had accrued at the point of this interview and had applied for several scholarships to help offset her growing debt burden. She suggested that a large unexpected expense would make her reprioritize her active co-curricular involvement and work more hours to allow her to continue as a student. Despite her financial concerns, she believed she could pay for next semester to study abroad. Celia’s financial struggles were deeper than she admitted; she formally withdrew from River Town after five completed semesters for financial reasons.

Conclusion

These four individual stories provide insight about the challenges transfer students face when they arrive at a new institution as well as the difficulties they encounter that may ultimately lead to a student’s departure from yet another institution without receiving a degree. While transition, integration, and success for transfer students are nuanced for each individual student, several themes emerged from the collective

experiences transfer students voiced throughout the interviews that we will analyze further in the next chapter:

1) Both successful course articulation and following a clear path to graduation are essential to guide a student towards degree completion. Jason and Amanda, our Persisters, articulated the ease with which their credits transferred to River Town. Additionally, both students successfully transferred all of the course credits they expected to receive. Essentially, there were no surprises or expressed dissatisfaction with the outcome of the credit transfer. The simplicity of the credit transfer process for them helped set a solid foundation to plan for the remaining courses they would take to satisfy major and liberal education requirements. The transferred courses the students brought with them, along with strong academic advising, gave them a clear idea of the time and the courses needed to graduate in a timely manner.

Jessica and Celia, the Non-Persisters, both encountered problems successfully transferring course credits and designing a clear path to graduation. Jessica repeated a math course she believed she had already taken at a previous institution rather than appeal the university's initial course articulation. Jessica also had unrealistic expectations about the time she needed to graduate. This misalignment of expectations along with academic progression issues likely led to her departure from River Town. Celia chose not to transfer any of her credits to River Town and spent valuable time repeating courses. While Celia had one of the best known academic advisors at the university, she had difficulties successfully completing all of her courses each semester, thus, causing a need to revise her path to graduation each time she failed or withdrew from a course.

2) Financial support weighs heavily into a transfer student's ability to persist. Three students (Amanda, Jessica and Celia) all highlighted concerns about finances playing a significant role in their ability to remain at River Town. Jessica and Celia both withdrew from the university citing finances as the reason they needed to leave. Jessica directly identified significant financial stress stemming from her need to work to pay her bills and her need to take a reduced course-load but still pay full-time tuition. Her financial concerns were exacerbated by her ineligibility for state grant money because of her minimal course load each semester.

Even though she persisted, Amanda's significant financial concerns focused on her ongoing struggle to pay her monthly living expenses. Jason, also a Persister, encountered a difficulty with finances but his trouble stemmed from a lack of understanding the process he needed to follow in his initial semester. He mentioned nothing about finances impacting his experience beyond the first semester. Regardless of outcome, all of the students here experienced some level of concern about finances or financial aid. For half of the students introduced in this chapter, financial concerns led to their departure from River Town without earning a degree.

3) Successful completion of academic courses leads to persistence and graduation; difficulties that result in withdrawal or failure in courses leads to student departure, despite university support. Jason and Amanda, the Persisters, described continued success and progress in all of their courses and reported no formal difficulties. Both of these students eventually graduated. Conversely, Jessica and Celia, the Non-Persisters, shared stories about significant academic challenges regarding course

work itself and personal issues that contributed to their failure of or withdrawal from a course.

4) Co-curricular engagement (non-curricular activities and organizational involvement on campus) are both a factor supporting and constraining transfer student success. Jason and Celia talked about their co-curricular involvement as a place where they continued to thrive and remain connected to the campus community while Amanda and Jessica did not have the time to engage in activities or organizations outside of class. Celia clearly prioritized her co-curricular involvement over her academics, which played a role in her departure from River Town.

5) Balancing many responsibilities is a predominant concern for all transfer students, particularly because most students have significant work obligations. Three students (Jason, Amanda and Jessica) all discussed struggles to balance school and work. The fourth student, Celia, talked about an imbalance between her student organization involvement and the time she needed to dedicate to her academic courses.

6) Transfer students relied on internal support systems of faculty, staff and classmates to help them navigate the university and feel connected to the community. No single source of support accounts for successful completion, though all four students named multiple people at River Town who assisted them in and out of classes. All of the students also shared the importance and reliance they placed on the direct support they received from academic advisors, course instructors, student affairs staff and/or peers and classmates.

7) Transfer students relied heavily on their external support systems. All four students also described strong support systems outside the university. However, the

ability of parents, family members and friends to provide notable emotional encouragement to these students as they endeavored through their college careers does not differentiate the more from the less successful transfer students.

8) Students must prioritize degree completion over other demands and desires. Motivation is key. Amanda and Jessica specifically called attention to their motivation as a prominent factor in their ability to continue as non-traditional students at a university with a large traditionally-aged student population. Jason and Jessica shared strong motivation to pursue specific careers that required four-year degrees. Amanda, in addition to self-motivation, realized the importance of a four-year degree to open opportunities for herself. Even though Jessica was motivated, other challenges interfered with ability to finish her degree at River Town and ultimately led to her departure. Of the four, Celia demonstrated the least motivation for her academics. Her motivation came from extracurricular involvement which carried her to a breaking point in her academic career and ultimately ended her pursuit of a traditional four-year degree path.

9) Ability to overcome significant challenges plays a significant role in transfer students' success. Jessica and Celia encountered significant academic challenges throughout their college careers at River Town. Jessica's difficulties stemmed from her physical and mental health concerns as well as her need to meet financial obligations to sustain her living expenses. Celia seemed unprepared for the rigors of River Town which finally resulted in her formal suspension from the institution. Neither of these students was able to overcome their personal barriers to succeed.

CHAPTER 5: PERSISTERS and NON-PERSISTERS

Using 42 initial interviews and 19 follow-up interviews, this second results chapter presents aggregated student responses to critical questions about their transition and persistence at River Town University. In addressing factors that facilitated their initial transition to the university, interviewed transfer students answered questions about who they were and why they chose to transfer to River Town. They also reflected on their motivation, personal goals and expectations and their experiences transferring previously-earned credits between institutions, financial aid and the impact on their adjustment. With respect to key elements to persistence to graduation, students addressed the role of general finances, academic adjustment and the importance of academic plans to their ability to remain enrolled. They discussed how they spent time outside of class, the support systems and resources they used, and perceptions of their own success and how these factors influenced their persistence. Students who remained at River Town (the “Persisters”) are compared to students who left River Town (the “Non-Persisters”) to understand the differences in their experiences and what impacts transfer student persistence.

Persisters

Persisters’ demographics.

Based on information available from River Town’s institutional records and student responses, the Persisters from both the initial interviews and the follow-up interviews represented a rather diverse group of college students. (See Appendix G: Demographics of All Persisters for a complete summary). At the time of analysis, 23 students had graduated and 16 were still enrolled at the university. Two-thirds of the

Persisters were female and self-identified as traditional students. Three-quarters of the students were white and almost three-quarters of the students were commuters. All students took classes full-time. A majority of all Persisters began at River Town with either sophomore or junior standing. Almost half of the students transferred from 2-year public community colleges and more than a quarter of them transferred from 4-year public universities. Two-thirds of the Persisters attended only one institution prior to River Town and the other third attended two or more colleges before River Town. Thirteen students completed initial interviews and follow-up interviews. Only three students who participated in the follow-up interviews did not complete an initial interview.

Preview of the findings.

Persisters, in general, seemed to have seamless transitions to the new university and progress throughout their time at River Town. Key factors that emerged about these students from this data to influence successful transfer student transition and persistence were: a relatively smooth transition through the admissions, course articulation and financial aid process; personal motivation (with both intrinsic and extrinsic foci); external accountability and support; and the ability to reflect on what matters most to them in their college experience. How the university supports Persisters beginning upon their arrival throughout their time at River Town, particularly with regard to their academic performance and academic plan, also was identified as a critical factor in transfer student persistence. In the remainder of this section, a detailed examination of the data will be presented to support findings described above.

Initial transition to the university

Setting the stage for persistence: Reasons for choosing River Town and student expectations. The factors contributing to a student's decision to transfer and to choose another institution often reflect the student's priorities for their continuing educational experience. Most of the students in this study offered several reasons for choosing this institution. Surprisingly, the most common factor cited for choosing the institution had little to do with the primary purpose of River Town: providing academic programs of study leading to degrees. Instead, students noted aspects such as location, general college attributes, extracurricular opportunities, small campus size, "feel" of the campus, and the fact that "they always wanted to attend this institution" as the main reasons for selecting this institution. These non-academic and often intangible characteristics of the school were mentioned by almost all of the Persisters.

However, the second most common factor for selecting this institution, mentioned by almost half of the Persisters, was academic appeal. Students said they chose the college for the strong academic reputation of the institution, while the strength of specific academic programs was the main reason for several students.

Calling attention to an unexpected point made by 1/4 of the Persisters, some of these students made certain to note that River Town was the only choice they considered when they decided to transfer, which highlighted their commitment specifically to their institutional choice. One student emphasized that River Town was always in her sights; she had planned to come to this institution before she decided to attend the community college (Participant #9, personal communication, January 27, 2009). These students were positive River Town was their best college match long before their arrival.

While students' reasons for choosing a new institution highlight their specific interests and needs, they focused largely on non-academic factors. For students with previous college experience, it is surprising that their decisions reflect a lesser emphasis on the academic experience even though they articulated graduation as their clear goal.

Their range of decision-making factors may indicate greater sophistication and thoughtfulness about the importance of personal fulfillment in the college experience as well as their commitment, as Persisters, to getting their River Town degree. Table 5.1 provides a summary of the primary factors stated by students for selecting their new institution.²

Table 5.1

Persisters: Reason for Choosing River Town

Primary factors for selecting the new institution	Number of students
Non-academic characteristics	
Location of the university	11
General university attributes	10
Only chose this institution as a transfer option	9
"Feel" of the campus	5
Extracurricular opportunities	4
Academic characteristics/appeal	14

Notes. Question 1 in initial interview: "Why did you choose this university?" Students were not limited in the number of reasons they could give for selecting this institution

Reasons for leaving the previous institution. Students' decisions for leaving their former institutions give great insight into the experience they expect to have or goal they expect to achieve at their new university. Transferring, for almost 40% of the Persisters, was a means to achieve the goal of obtaining a four-year degree. All of the students who gave this reason transferred from institutions with terminal degrees at the

² Two students did not specify any reason for selecting River Town in their interviews.

community college level, for-profit or vocationally-related degree programs where they could not meet their desire educational goals. Though the desire to move to four-year institution was the same, the students' motivations differed slightly.

Tied almost evenly for the most significant cause for departure, many students chose to leave their former institutions for personal reasons. Almost half of these students mentioned they wanted a more urban location and its accompanying opportunities or expressed a desire to be closer to home. Others noted that medical issues required them to be near home and the medical care they required.

Academic concerns also weighed into decisions to depart from their previous institution choice for many students. One student described dissatisfaction with the academic support she received as the stimulus for her decision to leave:

I didn't have a good grasp on what my options were or what I could do. I was struggling with the major I had and one comment sticks out to me she said "[Student's name removed], not everyone's cut out for college" and I was like this isn't the type of thing I'm looking for and so I just took it upon myself to change my major. I tried contacting people through email and didn't get a response and I think that's really what my problem was just trying to get the help that I needed (Participant #6F, personal communication, December 3, 2009).

Other examples of academic reasons were the desire for a change in major, or the belief that River Town would provide greater academic challenges, more internship opportunities – one of River Town's curricular emphases -- or other general opportunities than their previous college did not offer.

Several students, particularly traditionally-aged students who transferred after a short time in another four-year college, described their previous institutions as the wrong “fit” for them or an institution size that did not provide what they wanted. One student explained the mismatch between his expectations and what the institutional culture offered: “the atmosphere was not appropriate for what [he] wanted to obtain at a college” (Participant #2F, personal communication, November 30, 2009). A number of students described social concerns as the impetus for transferring, like feeling “unhappy socially” or disliking the atmosphere that felt “like a party most of the time” (Participant #15, personal communication, November 5, 2009 and Participant #23, personal communication, November 10, 2010).

Students’ factors for departing from their previous institution focused on their strong desire to complete a four-year degree. This particular reason was mentioned only by those who came from community colleges. A host of personal reasons (often focused on the more desirable location of the institution for their needs) also ranked highly among their reasons for leaving. Not surprising, poor academic experience with faculty, staff or major itself contributed to the departure of students from other four-year institutions. Finally, the general sense that the institution did not “fit” them was important in their consideration to leave their previous college or university. Understanding this piece of a transfer students’ previous experience gives great perspective on what they expect to find at the new institution. Table 5.2 summarizes the primary reasons students cited for their departure from their previous institution.

Table 5.2
Persisters: Reasons for Transfer

Primary factors for departure from previous institution	Number of students
Complete a four-year degree	15
Personal reasons	14
Academic concerns	7
Not the “right fit”	6
Social concerns	3

Note. Results from Question 2 in the initial interview and Question 14 in the follow-up interview.

What transfer students want: Student expectations of River Town. Students arrive at a new university with clear expectations of the experience they intend to have.³ Almost half of the Persisters in this study wanted a supportive environment, first and foremost, with small class sizes and promised resources. Effective advising and instruction also emerged as an expectation for these students. These students wanted clear assignments and course expectations, strong advising and help to achieve individual goals. A few students also wanted to be challenged in the classroom by “knowledgeable professors” (Participant #24, personal communication, August 17, 2010). To succeed and complete their undergraduate degrees, the Persisters recognized the critical role of support from the university to their success. Table 5.3 reviews what students hoped the university would offer to support them through graduation.

³ This question was only asked of 13 students who matriculated in 2009.

Table 5.3
Persisters: Expectations of the Institution

Most frequently named expectations for the institution	Number of students
Supportive environment	6
Effective advising and teaching	3
Provide academic challenge	3
Did not have specific expectations	3

Note. Results from Question 11 in the initial interview

Aiming high from the beginning: Persisters' goals and motivation. Self-expectations and motivation underscore what students hope to accomplish while completing their degree. Students were asked what expectations they had for themselves while at the university⁴. “[I want to] complete in four years or less, keep [my] GPA up, be on [the] Deans list, [I] want to get involved more and have a good time” (Participant #15, personal communication, November 5, 2009). This quote encapsulates the high expectations and goals Persisters set for themselves. Almost all of the Persisters said they wanted to get “good grades” or to “do well.” Some students directed their desire for strong academic performance to specific outcomes like, “Make the Dean’s List”, “keep my scholarship” or “get a 4.0.” (Participants 15, personal communication, November 5, 2009 and Participant 19, personal communication, September 7, 2010; Participant #26, personal communication, November 12, 2010; and Participant #17, personal communication, February 2, 2010). One student wanted distinction, “I expect to stand out...I really want to stand out to my professors, but [to meet] the very high expectations that I have for myself” (Participant #4F, personal communication, December 2, 2009) and another said “...to do well on everything I do” (Participant #17F, personal

⁴ 13 students responded to this question.

communication, April 28, 2010). Persisters held themselves to high standards from the start.

Several students wanted to develop specific skills in their field of interest, or to use in their post-college life, and to maximize their learning experiences. One student articulated that it is important to “...gain different skills I can use in the real world” (Participant #16F, personal communication, April 28, 2010 and Participant #14F, personal communication, December 16, 2009). One student wanted to “...take away the most knowledge I can to transfer...to my students when I start teaching” (Participant #14, personal communication, October 20, 2009). Other students described a desire for intellectual development and to enhance their critical thinking skills in their time at River Town:

... [I want to] gain the skills and knowledge that are offered at an academic institution and the opportunity to really grow in those respects and not just gaining knowledge, but also grow as a thinker. That’s really, really important to me, but then also to have to use those skills later in life and have more opportunities open up. I plan on going to grad school. I think if nothing else, [I hope to gain] personal enrichment really and [be] a better, more thoughtful, more informed citizen (Participant #4F, personal communication, December 2, 2009). Yet another student expressed a desire to fill her “passion for learning” (Participant #9F, personal communication, December 4, 2009). Some students recognized and highly valued the non-monetary benefits of a four-year degree. For a majority of Persisters, academic success was a top priority though many others sought knowledge, and

intellectual development and skills they could apply to their future careers and lives after college.

Over half of the students prioritized taking advantage of opportunities presented by the university as a primary objective. Several students specifically described a desire to be active in the campus community as a goal for themselves. One student emphasized student involvement as a priority for her when she transferred "...especially [since] that really hasn't happened because I got caught up in schoolwork" (Participant #16F, personal communication, April 28, 2010). Another student focused her extracurricular activities on opportunities that related to her future profession. Persisters clearly wanted to make the most of their experience at River Town.

Completing their bachelors' degrees was Persisters' top priority. More than half of the students named graduation as their most desired outcome, many with a specific time line in mind. Half of the Persisters identified that their motivation to graduate came from a desire to improve their job opportunities and to work in their field of interest. Two of the non-traditional students had slightly different perspectives on the importance of achieving their degree. One student said, "Because of the position I am in, [I was told] I have to have a four-year degree [to keep my job]. (Participant #1F, personal communication, November 30, 2009). The other student's previous experience working full-time gave her a new perspective on the value of getting a degree:

I was working in management and I got laid off...It was definitely the real world experience of not being able to get a job because I didn't have my B.A. was the final motivating factor (Participant # 11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009).

Although each of these students had different reasons for seeking their bachelor's degree, both of them returned to college because not having a college degree would (or would soon) hurt them in the "working world."

College graduation itself served a strong motivator for two students—both of these students were first-generation college students. The purpose of their college journey simply was to achieve something no one else in their family had accomplished. While many Persisters made it clear that graduation was their longer-term goal, it became apparent that Persisters focused on shorter term course performance goals or seeking specific learning experiences to enhance career preparation along the way to graduation. Persisters expected themselves to perform well academically, become more engaged in their fields of study, involve themselves in the campus community and hold themselves to a high standard of achievement. Persisters clearly identified both external and internal motivators to help them stay focused on earning their degrees. Improving their future careers and earning capacities and strong academic performance were their extrinsic motivators while expanding one's own knowledge and focusing on intellectual development provided them intrinsic rewards. Table 5.4 summarizes Persisters' primary goals for their years at River Town.

Table 5.4

Persisters: Self Expectations and Motivation to Complete the College Degree

Top expectations of self while at this university	Number of students
Strong academic success	22
Take advantage of opportunities	11
Be an active part of the campus community	3
Expand knowledge	5
Graduate	7
Primary motivators to complete four-year degree	Number of students
Improve job opportunities	8
Increase earning potential	3
Intellectual development	3
Pursue graduate school	3
Graduation	2

Note. Results compiled from responses to Question 10 in initial interview, Question 22 and Question 23 in the follow-up interviews. This question was not asked of 23 students as it was added to the initial interview protocol in Fall Semester 2009. All of the students to whom it was not asked matriculated in earlier semesters.

Laying the groundwork for success: Course credit articulation. In an effort to ensure that students know where they stand with their academic plan at a new university, they need a clear understanding about which of their previously earned college credits transfer and how those credits articulate toward their major and graduation requirements. To help assess their understanding and its impact on their experience, Persisters were asked for questions and concerns about course articulation on their transcripts⁵. Almost half of the students had no concerns about credits transferred; the process was seamless and they were satisfied with the results, although five students were waiting for final transcripts to arrive and go through the articulation process.

⁵ In the initial interviews, the formal question was asked directly of 13 students while other students brought up questions or concerns about course articulation in the course of their interviews without a particular question prompt.

For the students who had difficulties, the issues were complicated and took considerable time to solve. Most of the complexity came from River Town's policies about course articulation and mixed messages students received from various university staff. Several students described the need to meet with faculty and provide syllabi to prove contents of previous courses, but one student said he could not acquire the needed course syllabus and as a result, was not allowed to appeal the credit decision (Participant #1F, personal communication, November 30, 2009). Another student shared palpable frustration:

I talked to someone and they said [the course] was going to transfer and then I talked to someone else and they said it wasn't and then they just finally gave me my final [transcript evaluation] and they said that it does count...It was just frustrating not knowing if it does or doesn't (Participant #10F, personal communication, December 7, 2009).

Another student described difficulty with general education credits transferred from his former private college. He was given an option to resolve the issue as he described:

I could do all this work to petition it but I'm ready to take [an intermediate level course] anyways...and I also had another issue where ...a Japanese class...wasn't [articulated as an] international [course] when I came in but I just emailed [inquiring about] it and it came in international within a week. It was really good (Participant #7F, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

For one student, a university policy about how many credits needed to be taken at River Town to qualify for graduation frustrated her. She got different answers from different people when she asked questions about it and when she appealed the policy; her request

was refused (Participant #19F, personal communication, May 18, 2010). A number of students needed to take more classes to fulfill requirements that had not been accepted in the course articulation process. For one student, this meant repeating two business courses she already took at her previous community college because River Town would not apply those credits for her major. Three students, who had been at River Town for several semesters, were still working on resolving their credit issues at the time of the interview. These students were justly disheartened by the time involved to complete credit transfer process.

The initial assessment of previously earned credits determines what courses students take in their first semester and sets the foundation for their academic plan. Unresolved issues and failed articulations not only result in frustration for the students, but have a direct impact on the students' academic plan and timelines. For the Persisters, some students experienced an easy credit transition and others experienced a long, anxiety-ridden process. In most cases of concern with these students, the previously earned credits in question would have counted towards a student's major or toward the university's liberal education requirements and would have impacted their academic plan. Table 5.5 summarizes the key results from the Persisters' experiences with the course articulation process.

Table 5.5
Persisters: Experience transferring credits

Key descriptors of the credit transfer experience	Number of students
No problems in the process	15
Process was difficult	8
Unsatisfied with the outcome	3
Resolution time for credit issues	Number of students
No issues to resolve	8
Issues resolved shortly after arrival	3
Issues took longer than a semester to resolve	6
Outstanding issues with transferred credits	Number of students
No outstanding issues	12
Final transcript not submitted to university	5
Students expressed concerns about articulation	5
Awaiting response on course articulation	2
Unspecified concerns	2

Note. Results compiled from responses to Questions 13 and 14 in initial interview, and Questions 12 and 13 in the follow-up interviews. Both questions are multi-level questions.

Financial aid: The transfer students' new bottom line. Finances often pose an insurmountable challenge for college students to complete their undergraduate degrees. Transfer students have even more concerns based on limited remaining eligibility for federal and state grants and loans. Finances and outstanding tuition balances can cause students significant stress and for some, could lead to their departure from the university. At River Town, financial concerns are the top reason students give for withdrawing from the institution. Those who began as transfer students at the university are even more susceptible to these financial burdens. That sense about financial burden starts immediately. Transfer students need to have a thorough understand of their financial obligations to River Town, particularly when they arrive at a new institution. In the initial

interviews, students were asked if they had any questions or concerns about their current financial aid package ^{6 7} or being able to pay for future semesters.

While almost half of the students did not have questions or specific concerns about their financial aid packages, approximately one-third of the students had questions, concerns, or stresses regarding their financial obligations to River Town. Several students expressed concerns over outstanding tuition bill balances at the time of the interview.

One student had such significant concerns that he had:

submitted a contract release early last week to get out of the residential hall and move home so he can afford to pay the rest of the bill. He would rather [have] stay[ed] on campus, but moving home [would have been] the easiest for him to continue to meet his financial obligation (Participant #1, personal communication, October 9, 2008).

Another student had encountered an unexpected circumstance that made it difficult to pay her remaining balance. At the time of the interview, she had “some loan issues. She was going through a financial aid appeal process... because her father lost his job” (Participant #10F, personal communication, December 7, 2009). Finally, one student emphasized that he needed to complete his degree in 2 years while he “received his mom's [tuition remission benefit]” (Participant #11, personal communication, December 9, 2009). These students’ financial concerns ran deep.

A few students had not received their financial aid packages before they began classes and were working to gain an understanding of their aid packages at the time of the initial interview. The delay in a receiving financial aid package hurts the student’s

⁶ Three students did not answer this question.

⁷ Two students did not receive financial aid from the institution making the question irrelevant for them.

transition because it creates significant stress. Often, though, these same students make their decision to attend River Town shortly before the semester begins without all of the necessary information. They begin behind. Despite the fact that these students persisted at River Town, several students encountered financial hardships. The stress created by these concerns impacted decisions they made about their priorities as students at River Town. Table 5.6 shows the most prominent questions or concerns identified by students in their transition to the university.

Table 5.6
Persisters: Initial Concerns about Financial Aid

Key questions or concerns about financial aid	Number of students
No issues:	
Did not have questions	13
Expressed no concern for financial aid	11
Had a full understanding of financial aid package	2
Expressed specific concerns:	
Had outstanding balances	5
Financial aid award was delayed	2
Inquired about work-study process	2

Note. Results compiled from Question 12 in the initial interview.

Persistence to graduation

The role of finances on student persistence. In the follow-up interviews, students discussed the role of finances on their ability to remain at River Town⁸. Half of the students (6 of 12) who answered the question said finances determined whether they could stay. Scholarships and grants students received made the university affordable to three students. One student remarked:

⁸ 12 students responded to this question

I am so, so, so, so fortunate in that my education is being paid for through scholarships and grants. So that aspect of actually paying to stay here is not my biggest concern, it's all the things outside of that that have been really stressful for me. (Participant #11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009).

While the scholarships and grants obviously help students, there are still financial struggles that exist with regard to living expenses. Other students struggled to figure out how to pay tuition, but made it a priority:

I came here because it was cheaper than [institution name removed]. That was one of my first reasons. The loans that I took out there were out of control. Money is very important.... My mom actually just got laid off about a week ago so that will be hard (Participant #19F, personal communication, May 18, 2010).

One student shared the pressure she felt for building student loan debt:

That was my parents', of course, number one concern when I was transferring.... We were able to deal with it for awhile, but just this semester I've had to take out loans so I'm already feeling the stress of that (Participant #6F, personal communication, December 3, 2009).

Another student decided to petition some previously earned credits that had not transferred so she could graduate a bit earlier:

That is the reason why I'm filing a petition to get those credits.... If I could choose, I would just take another year here and do an internship but all those things cost money and I don't have the ability to get a loan (Participant #8F, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

A couple of students believed finances had some role in their ability to remain at the university. One student used student loans for tuition and living expenses after she exhausted her savings account: “I’ve taken out student loans for the cost of living as well as tuition...It has been a challenge but I have worked and like I said, I did have some savings which are long gone” (Participant #13F, personal communication, December 15, 2009). Another student believed the investment though, costly, was worth it: “I have a lot of student loans but I didn’t really think of money as an issue. I really wanted a good education and I knew that a private college would do that for me (Participant #10F, personal communication, December 7, 2009).

In addition to asking students about the general role of finances in their ability to stay at this college, students were asked to assess their level of confidence to pay the next semester’s tuition⁹. Only half of the students felt confident they could pay their tuition expenses. Three students were fairly confident and two students expressed strong concern over their ability to pay for the next semester.

More students expressed concerns about paying their living expenses. One student said she relied on her significant other to help with expenses. Another student conveyed immediate concern over her money situation: “...at the moment, I have no idea how I’m going to make it through December and I have no idea how I’m going to pay my bills in May. But this happened last semester and somehow I made it through” (Participant #11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009). A number of students curtailed social activities with friends to help them meet their expenses.

The students were split in their perceptions of what role finances play in their ability to remain enrolled at the college. For some students, they believed their financial

⁹ 10 students responded to this question

situation could end or disrupt their path to a four-year degree, but for others, they did not see it as a significant concern. More students expressed greater concerns about paying their living expenses than paying their tuition bills. Even though Persisters experienced stress about their finances, they committed themselves to persisting at River Town. Table 5.7 offers an overview of the Persisters' responses to questions about the role of finances on persistence and their confidence to handle upcoming financial expectations.

Table 5.7
Persisters' Perception of Finances

Role of finance on students' ability to persist	Number of students
Significant role	6
Some role	2
No role	4
Confidence to pay upcoming tuition and fees	Number of students
Confident	5
Fairly confident	3
Not confident	2
Confidence to pay monthly living expenses	Number of students
Confident	4
Fairly confident	3
Not confident	3
Confidence to pay everyday expenses	Number of students
Confident	7
Fairly confident	1
Not confident	2
Confidence to pay for social activities with family and friends	Number of students
Confident	6
Fairly confident	2
Not confident	2

Note. Results compiled from responses to Questions 30 and 31 in follow-up interviews

Competing responsibilities. Transfer students often have outside responsibilities that vie for their time and focus. The students in this study are no different. Thirty of 36 students worked and 10 worked between 20 and 40 hours per week. Table 5.8 identifies where and how often students were working while going to college.

Table 5.8
Persisters: Student Work Obligations

Student work description	Number of students
Working off-campus	18
Working on-campus	5 ^a
Not employed	6
Volunteer	2
Number of hours of work per week (on average) ^b	Number of students
Not working	6
1-4 hours	3
5-9 hours	2
10-14 hours	4
15-19 hours	2
20-29 hours	6
30-40 hours	4
Varied hours	2

Note. Results compiled from responses to Question 8 in the initial interviews.

^a Student intends to find on-campus employment sooner after the interview.

^b Three students mentioned that they worked in the course of the interview but did not note how much they worked.

Half of the students interviewed worked off-campus as shown in Table 5.6. Additionally, one-third of the students who discussed the number of hours they worked suggested that they worked between 20 and 40 hours per week while enrolled as a student, most often full-time. One-third of the students who were working more than 20 hours/week named balancing their responsibilities and time management as concerns for them.

In addition to work as a competing responsibility for these transfer students, three of the Persisters were parents of young children. Two of the student parents worked between 30-40 hours a week to support their families. Their motivation to complete their college degrees came in part from their desire to provide a more financial secure future for their families. With a significant amount of their time already taken by work and other obligations, many transfer students, and the students in this particular study, found it difficult to balance their competing priorities.

When students were asked about their most significant challenge to overcome in their first semester at the university, more than half of the students (7 of 12) focused their responses on struggle to balance all that was on their proverbial “plates.” Many of the students named time management skills as the problem but described balance as the broader concern, particularly between work and school. While most students reported challenges adjusting to the academic rigor at River Town, half of the Persisters who encountered academic difficulty in courses worked at least 20 hours per week or worked two jobs. Finding needed time to tackle a tough course when it conflicts with work obligations or other external responsibilities is difficult for these students to handle and ultimately impinges on their overall academic progress and success.

While there was a general sense that an adjustment to the new expected academic rigor was a challenge for most students, these students specifically named time management and the need to balance all of their obligations effectively as the greatest difficulty in their transition to River Town. Students revealed their greatest challenges and pressures to overcome in their first semesters at the university in Table 5.9.

Table 5.9
Persisters: Greatest General Challenge First Semester

Primary transition challenges identified	Number of students
Time management	7
Balancing all of student's responsibilities	5
Academic performance	3

Note. Results compiled from the responses to Question 7 in the initial interview.

With many transfer students experiencing competing responsibilities outside of the university, it is often difficult for them to engage in university life outside the classroom. This lack of engagement often impacts their ability to persist at the institution. The results from the interviews with Persisters in this study, however, show that almost half of the students had become involved in at least one organization, athletic group or activity within the first few weeks of their arrivals at River Town.¹⁰ Almost half of the students who were already involved were student-athletes and were heavily involved with their team practices, fitness trainings and games.

For students who had not already joined, they described a strong intent to get involved with specific organizations. Some students delay their involvement after completing one semester to get settled into the university. A few students made their curricular focus clear by articulating a conscious decision not to get involved, the “goal is school” (Participant #17, personal communication, February 2, 2010).

Direct engagement or the intention to get involved, for most of the Persisters evidenced their desire to connect to the full university experience. For the group of Persisters studied, involvement appeared to be an important piece of their River Town experience: three-quarters of them were involved or planned to be involved at some point

¹⁰ Three students did not answer the question when asked.

during their time at River Town and prioritized having these opportunities into their lives. Despite the significance of involvement for this group, there were still many who intentionally did not get involved for a multitude of reasons but work or other external obligations were often barriers to their on-campus engagement. Table 5.10 addresses how involved students became in the first semester at their new institution.

Table 5.10
Persisters: Campus Involvement

Reported Involvement status	Number of students
Already involved	
Involved with at least one student organization	6
Participates on varsity athletic team	6
Involved with intramural sports	2
Intended to get involved with student organizations	13
Not involved with any student organizations	10
Unsure if time allows involvement	2

Note. Results compiled from responses to Question 9 in the initial interviews.

Commuters, even those who persisted and those who were involved, spent as little time on campus as possible. One student articulated the commuter students' mindset about limited engagement:

I usually don't spend any more time on campus than I have to, unless I'm working or meeting with groups, I usually ...study... at my house but if for some reason it's really noisy, I might come to the library. That's really rare. (Participant # 10F, personal communication, December 7, 2009).

All of the commuter students said they participated in class-related studying or meetings.

Participant #16F said, "The only reason that I'm here outside of class is for other

appointments or meetings with classmates to do schoolwork” (Participant #16F, personal communication, April 28, 2010). Another student said:

I like being able to get away and so I don’t choose to spend a lot of time on campus other than classes or some homework between classes or a little bit after... I came into [River Town] already having some friends so the social element doesn’t seem to feel as urgent or necessary (Participant #4F, personal communication, December 2, 2009).

Even though six students in our follow-up interview sample participate in sports, only two students acknowledged athletics in their time spent on campus. Clearly through this analysis, commuter students use their time outside of class to accomplish specific class-related tasks or activities; beyond these purposes, they tended to leave campus immediately for home or other obligations.

All students living on-campus mentioned time spent satisfying at least one basic human need (e.g. eating or exercising). Not surprisingly, almost half of the students named social elements of college life too. Class-related studying or activities dominated commuter student responses about how time was spent on campus, but for residential students, only a few students mentioned time they spent on class or assignment preparation.

Despite reporting limited engagement on campus, more than half of the students said they were involved with formalized student groups¹¹. Almost all of the students, who were involved, participated in student organizations, often connected to their curricular interests. Despite the active involvement of these students, almost 1/3 of the students was not involved with any student organization and formalized activities. All of the

¹¹ 15 students responded to this question.

uninvolved students were non-traditional students and older than the traditional college-aged students or had their own families. Their lack of campus engagement stemmed from the need to manage other priorities rather than disinterest (see Appendix M for a summary of Persisters' on-campus engagement).

Persisters' academic performance: For better or for worse, then better.

"Transfer shock" is a common phenomenon among transfer students when students do not perform as well in their first semesters at their new institution as they did at their previous institution. Though at River Town, most of the students in this study performed the same or better academically than at their previous institutions. Those who performed better attributed the positive change to a better learning environment (better instructors, taking courses in their fields of interest, and feeling more challenged).

Personal determination also emerged as a factor for these students' success in the classroom. One student said she had "... a drive to succeed academically after I transferred here" (Participant #16F, personal communication, April 28, 2010). Participant #14F set higher expectations for herself which she affirmed through stronger academic performance. A better-suited academic environment, strong self-motivation and setting high standards made the difference in helping these Persisters get a strong start to their academic careers at River Town.

Some Persisters, though, experienced transfer shock. Two students attributed the decline to courses that were more rigorous than their previous institution (Participants #2F and #7F). Another student described multiple challenges to her adjustment both in and out of the classroom as a contributing factor to her lower academic results: "... I

wasn't used to this school. I wasn't used to having a roommate and everything was kind of out-of-whack" (Participant #3F, personal communication, December 2, 2009).

"Transfer shock" often subsides after the first semester and results in improved academic performance. We see evidence of this concept at work in this student data where most of the students described their academic performance as the same or better than first semester. Those who performed better believed better acclimation, better learning environment, or improved study habits made the difference. Changes in other students' non-academic commitments by "reducing work hours" or being in the "off-season" for athletics helped their academic success. While most Persisters began their academic careers at River Town strongly, some Persisters seemed to have experienced "transfer shock", but recovered effectively. Table 5.11 provides a summary of academic performance trends for Persisters.

Table 5.11
Persisters' Academic Performance Trends

Grade point average (GPA) in first semester	Number of students
Same as previous institution	7
Higher than previous institution	5
Lower than previous institution	4
Reasons for grade point average increase or decrease	
GPA increase:	
Better learning environment	3
Personal determination	2
GPA decrease:	
Courses more rigorous	3
Grade point average in second semester	Number of students
Stronger than first semester	6
Same as first semester	6
Lower than first semester	4
Reasons for grade point average increase or decrease in second semester:	
Stronger GPA:	
Better acclimation to the university	2
Improved study habits	2
Lower GPA:	
Balancing more responsibilities	3

Note. Results compiled from responses to Questions 8, 9, 10 and 11 in the follow-up interviews

The golden path to graduation. The prominent concern for transfer students when they arrive at a new university is whether they will be able to graduate in a timely manner. All but one of the Persisters in this study said they were on track with major and general education requirements. However, when asked if their graduation date was on the timeline they anticipated when they enrolled, about one-fourth of students said their graduation date was delayed. Three-quarters of the Persisters kept their major the same

from the time they arrived which helped keep them on track with their graduation timelines.

Students who were able to stay on their perceived track to graduation attributed proper advising, careful credit monitoring, and taking additional courses as common strategies that helped them stay the course. Students who cited proper advising described working closely with their major advisor or a professional academic advisor to evaluate what courses they needed to meet graduation requirements. One student who used a strategy of careful credit monitoring said, “I try to keep up myself. [I used] the degree evaluation online... and I continually every semester check to see what I need to fulfill and what classes are available for that” (Participant 7F, personal communication, December 4, 2009). Regarding self-motivation as a factor in timely progress to graduation, one student said “being very determined” while taking full academic loads each semester helped her (Participant #11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009).

Students who did not believe they were on track to graduation named credit transfer problems, adjustment issues (“getting used to a new school”) and unanticipated personal challenges (Participant #1F and Participant #13F) they had encountered to set them back while they were attending River Town (Participant #1F, personal communication, November 30, 2009; Participant #13F, personal communication, December 15, 2009). For some students, these problems presented temporary obstacles to their path to graduation. All of these students successfully overcame their encountered problems. A majority of the Persisters encountered few problems in making timely

progress to graduation. Table 5.12 provides an overview of Persisters' responses to questions about staying on track to graduate in a timely manner.

Table 5.12
Persisters: Timeline to graduation

Reported academic progress to graduation	Number of students
On track with major and university requirements	
Yes	15
No	1
Major change since arrival at this institution:	
No change	12
Changed major	2
Add another major	1
Undecided on arrival, decision made by interview time	1
Graduation timeline as expected:	
Yes	13
No	3
What helped students stay on track to graduation	
Proper advising	7
Careful credit monitoring	6
Taking additional courses beyond traditional semesters	4
Careful course selection	3
Taking overload of credits	2
Own motivation	2
No response	2
Obstacles encountered in academic progress to anticipated graduation timeline:	
Difficulty adjusting to the new university	1
Credits did not transfer from previous institution	1
Unanticipated personal challenges	1

Notes. Results compiled from responses to Questions 1, 3,4,5,6, and 7 in the follow-up interviews.

Significant support systems and resources.

Faculty contributors to transfer student success. At River Town, faculty members serve as primary academic advisors for students in their major area. Upon arrival, based on academic interest, students are assigned faculty advisors. While all faculty members receive training in academic advising, the student experiences with these advisors vary

widely by individual and by department. For transfer students at River Town, the relationship with a faculty advisor arguably is one of the most significant for the student to stay on track to graduation.

More than half of the Persisters portrayed their relationships with faculty advisors positively. They described helpful advisors who knew them and their goals, listened to their needs, helped them make careful course selections and navigated the university systems when needed. A few students described this strong advisor relationship:

She knows how frantic I get...I ask, 'Am I on the right path and what do I need to do?' We work it out every time and she breaks it down for me and it's just really very, very helpful because I think coming from [institution name removed] where I didn't have a very good adviser it means a lot to me to have someone like her to help me through there (Participant # 6F, personal communication, December 3, 2009).

She has probably been the most helpful in picking out my classes and setting a timeline and showing me where everything is gonna go than any other adviser that I've had.... I was really happy that she listened...

(Participant #3F, personal communication, December 2, 2009).

Faculty advisors clearly served as academic guides for these Persisters.

Other faculty members also played a significant role in the experience of these transfer students. Participant #4F articulated the importance of faculty in his experience at River Town:

...developing a relationship with my professors is very important too.; arguably more important to me than relationships with my peers at this point....I want to

show... just how much I want to be here and ...show that I am capable and an active learner (Participant #4F, personal communication, December 2, 2009).

For most of the participants in this study, faculty made direct contributions to their success as students. Largely, students described faculty members' willingness to help them when needed, and to accommodate learning styles or reinforce students' goals.

The role faculty played for many of the students in this study emphasized the importance of knowledgeable advisors to guide students on a path to graduation but also the importance of establishing a personal connection with their students in a mentoring capacity. Table 5.13 provides an overview of the role of faculty in the Persisters' collegiate experiences:

Table 5.13
Persisters: Relationships with Faculty Members

Description of relationship with academic advisor	Number of students
Get along well	9
Supportive of students' needs	9
Advisor is knowledgeable	4
Does not get needed assistance from faculty advisor	4
Students sought other faculty to assist with advising	3
Relationships with other faculty members	Number of students
Course-related interactions	6
Personal relationships	6
Significant out-of-class interaction	5
Role of faculty in students' success	Number of students
Faculty make themselves available to students	6
Willing to work with students	5
Hindered student success	2

Notes. Results compiled from responses to Questions 16, 17, and 18 in the follow-up interviews.

They get by with a little help from their (off-campus) friends: Peers' contributions to students' persistence. Peers (friends) played a more significant role than classmates for these students. A majority of students (10 of 16 students) said their friends played some role or a more substantial role in their persistence. For those who felt their friends played a role, the support given helped the Persisters stay focused: "...they're all like rooting me on all the time. ...I don't think I'd want to have to go back and tell all my friends that have been supporting me along the way that I didn't finish (Participant #11F, personal communication, December 9, 2009). Interestingly, the students who described the direct support role of their peers in their ability to stay were non-traditional students; friends mattered greatly in helping them achieve their goals.

For most of the students interviewed, classmates played a minor role at best in these students' persistence. Almost half of the students talked about their classmates playing little to no role with little explanation of their responses. They stated their responses matter-of-factly, though one student who offered an explanation of his disconnection with his classmates said:

Part of it is being so much older than a lot of these people... So it's just a 'where you are in life' difference. I mean how much does a 30-yr old married guy have in common with a 20-yr old single guy – not a whole lot. I mean, we can sit there and talk sports, but outside of that there isn't a lot. If you're doing class then you have a connection but outside of that... (Participant #1F, personal communication, November 30, 2009).

For students who said their classmates played a role in their persistence, they found the academic support helpful:

“With classmates, I think because [River Town] is a small enough school you get the same people in class with you semester after semester and so it becomes a lot easier to study with those people and learn from them and kind of have study sessions outside of class, which is nice” (Participant #13F, personal communication, December 15, 2009).

When Persisters identified the roles of their classmates in their persistence, they identified two common purposes for their relationships: to share information about the course with each other and to improve the class experience.

For the students in this study, peers had a more positive impact on students’ ability to persist at this institution. While these relationships were important to a majority of the students, they held great importance for non-traditional students. Classmates, to these students, played a more traditional role of being “useful” to review class materials, share notes or make the class more engaging.

Students also identified offices, services or people that contributed to their persistence. More than half of the Persisters named units in the student affairs division at River Town as difference-makers for them. The offices most frequently mentioned were the offices specifically serving transfer student services and the career development center. Students appreciated the direct assistance they received from the transfer student services office in their initial transition and beyond (Participants #2F, #7F, #9F, #10F, #11F). Transfer students used career development’s services to assist with career preparation early in their time at River Town to ready themselves to enter the workforce:

...the CDC [Career Development Center, as it is known at River Town] has really helped especially with an internship and... job searches... They gave me a good

starting point or a way to narrow things down because I had been doing a search before but it became overwhelming (Participant #16F, personal communication, April 28, 2010).

One-quarter of the students named various academic support offices as places they felt supported, like the Writing Center and the academic success unit. Another one-quarter of the Persisters identified administrative offices such as financial aid, work-study and the registration office as contributors to their success as well by helping them understand and navigate the processes and policies of the university.

Half of the students identified these offices and people named above because these people provided effective assistance to the students when they needed it. Other offices emerged on the “list” because they helped students improve their academic skills or assisted with career preparation or their general transition to the university.

Persisters found offices, faculty and staff they could trust to assist them when they needed it, both in and out of the classroom. From concerns about general adjustment to a new university to the intricacies of credit transfer or financial aid, these students expected and found a supportive environment. Table 5.14 summarizes Persisters’ responses to identify which offices and people contributed to their persistence as well as how these people helped them succeed.

Table 5.14
Contributors to Persisters' Transition and Success

Key offices and people that contributed to students' persistence	Number of students
Student Affairs offices	9
Faculty advisors	6
Professors	5
Academic support services	4
Administrative services	4
Ways offices and people contributed to students' success	Number of students
Listened and helped students when needed	8
Improved academic skills	5
Assistance with transition to the university	3
Career preparation	3
Addressed financial aid questions/concerns	3
Assistance in the credit transfer process	3

Note. Results compiled from the responses to Question 44 in the follow-up interviews.

Success is in the eye of the beholder. Perception of a student's own success often underlies the reality of their success or failure. Most of the students (13 of 16) said they had been successful in their time at the institution and gave a host of reasons for their responses. Their reasons for defining their experiences as successful tell a better story about the experiences both at this university and from their backgrounds that contribute to why they persisted to their degrees. Two students remarked that they had exceeded their own expectations. One student said:

I dealt with a really, really devastating bout of depression and anxiety for a period of time and it made it virtually impossible for me to be a super successful student, I've since overcome it. I think the downward slope towards graduation is helping quite a bit. The end is in sight (Participant #13F, personal communication, December 15, 2009).

Another student shared that he already had achieved his dream: being in college: “I’m able to be a college student which I never thought I would be” (Participant #1F, personal communication, November 30, 2009). One student explained her success by comparison to her experience at her previous university; the experience at River Town made her “believe in herself again”. Yet another student identified the importance of people, “...interesting people who’ve opened up different doors for me,” at River Town that helped shape her future in directions she had not imagined: (Participant #10F, personal communication, November 30, 2009).

A couple students, in particular, highlighted their development as students as a great success:

I think taking time with all of my work. There are certainly times when you do rush through it but really taking time with assignments and being careful, being thoughtful and as a result, feeling that I have put at least most of my best foot forward. That results in good feedback from professors. Good grades are just more confirmation that I’m going about my education in an effective matter. (Participant # 4F, personal communication, December 2, 2009).

I think my current GPA; I’m pretty proud of that. Especially with my beginning being kind of rough. It took me a couple years to figure out what college was and what I needed to do and succeed and to figure it out. It’s been really rewarding to get good grades in classes. My hard work is paying off. (Participant #16F, personal communication, April 28, 2010).

Students also talked about pushing themselves outside of their comfort zone: “I think stepping out of my boundaries, going to meetings and taking charge and it’s usually not

what I do, but I think it's definitely helped me a lot" (Participant #10F, personal communication, December 7, 2009).

Three-quarters of the Persisters identified success on particular assignments or in courses as their most noteworthy achievement¹². They realized short-term goals that gave them fulfillment and feed their drive to push toward graduation. A few students highlighted the extrinsic recognition of their hard work as a motivator and an acknowledgement of their success:

I really think [making the] Dean's List [is my proud accomplishment]. I mean it's hard to juggle everything. I mean it's nice to have an ok GPA but I have a great GPA. I'm not only going to school and getting it done, but I'm doing it well (Participant #19F, personal communication, May 18, 2010).

All of these students recognize their personal growth in these experiences. From the various forms of validation of their abilities, they got momentum to keep moving toward their goals. The recognition of this personal growth set the foundation for their persistence and success. They realized they could achieve beyond what they imagined. With each identified experience, students received reinforcement that their internal and external investment was worth the great effort these students undertake to earn their undergraduate degrees.

Conclusion

Through both the initial interviews and the follow-up interviews, data show that students who remained at River Town ("the Persisters"), in general, seemed to have reasonably seamless transitions to the new university and progress throughout their time

¹² 12 students answered this question.

at River Town. Most students had a few “bumps” in their transition and progression towards graduation, but the challenges did not have lasting impact on their experiences.

Initial transition to River Town. Persisters chose River Town for two primary reasons: non-academic and often intangible characteristics of the university like co-curricular offerings, the right “feeling” about the campus when they visited, or the fulfillment of their own aspirations to attend this university; and for the university’s academic reputation or the strength of particular major programs. They often left their previous institution to focus on completing a desired four-year degree, which was not offered through their former community colleges. A host of personal factors (often focused on the desirable location of the institution in a central, urban area) contributed to their decision-making process as well as poor academic experiences with faculty, staff or their chosen academic program itself. Finally, a significant reason for students’ departure from their previous institution featured the described impression that the institution did not “fit” them; it did not meet their intangible expectations.

Persisters expected River Town University to deliver on its promise of a supportive environment provided by faculty and staff, effective advising, and academic rigor to prepare them for their post-college endeavors. From themselves, they expected to perform well in the academic arena, hold themselves to high standards of achievement, to become engaged in their fields of study, and to take advantage of the curricular and co-curricular opportunities available at River Town. The ultimate goal for Persisters was to complete their undergraduate degree. Often, this group of students set smaller goals to guide them in achieving their primary objective: graduation. The smaller goals typically focused on strong academic performance each semester, or, in a specific course. These

students acknowledged self-efficacy as a significant factor in their success and demonstrated their motivation by setting achievement markers to accomplish while at River Town.

Careful planning and preparation emerged as a key element of the transfer process. For half of the Persisters, the course credit articulation process provided no hurdles, but for the other half, they described challenges and overt frustration to River Town's policies and processes; some of these students were still working out their issues semesters after arrival. While it is difficult to measure the direct impact of course articulation on persistence, its importance should not be minimized. Persisters, even those who were frustrated by the credit transfer process, understood the value of continuing to work through an often complicated process to get as many earned credits as possible; they were committed to graduating in the most efficient way.

Finances often pose a concern for all transfer students, but it was a lesser concern for the Persisters. Most Persisters took care of their financial obligations to River Town or resolved any issues that had arisen early in the semester. However, for students who encountered trouble in the financial aid process or had outstanding balances, though, the stresses were significant.

Persistence to graduation. Continuing to examine the role of finances for transfer students, Persisters appeared to have resolved their issues and did not allow any remaining financial strain to impact their ability to succeed academically or stay involved on-campus, despite early "bumps" in the financial aid process. Persisters made conscious choices to take care of their financial obligations to the university, though, some still struggled to cover their monthly living costs.

Persisters generally were engaged with athletics or student organizations outside of the classroom and found effective ways to balance their involvement with academics. A small, but significant number of Persisters made clear choices to prioritize their education along with work or other external obligations over co-curricular campus engagement, despite a desire to be more engaged. To a majority of Persisters, involvement made a difference in their undergraduate experiences.

The Persisters spent their time on campus efficiently in classes and managing class-related meetings or course preparation. Counter to existing research, many of the Persisters at River Town were involved with a formal student organization or athletic team. Despite their level of involvement, Persisters voiced significant concern over their ability to find balance and manage their time effectively. Even though Persisters identified challenges with balance and time management, they found ways to manage their time successfully and persist or graduate.

Academically, Persisters seemed to have experienced “transfer shock” but also recovered from their adjustment to River Town and its different demands effectively. They attributed their positive academic recovery to a better learning environment for them and to personal determination. These students also stayed on track to graduation by determining their academic path and sticking with it; few students changed their majors after arrival. Students also attributed their timely progress to strong academic advising and careful and frequent credit monitoring.

The university’s orientation program played a vital role in helping students begin their social adjustment as well as meet faculty and staff members who could help them navigate the new processes and policies at River Town. The role faculty played for many

of the students in this study emphasized the importance of knowledgeable advisors to guide students on a path to graduation but also the importance of establishing a personal mentoring connection with their students. Peers played a significant support role for these students as well, and in particular, for non-traditional students. Peers' role was more significant than the role of classmates. A support system in and out of the university was essential for these students.

Persisters identified the transfer student services office and the career development center as the places where they received the most directed support for their prioritized needs. These students also sought help from academic support services to assist with their classroom skills and from administrative services to help with their financial aid and credit transfer concerns. In general, though, students expected and found a supportive environment at River Town where they could seek faculty or staff attention and resolve their issues or concerns quickly.

A majority of Persisters named academic achievements in particular courses or by strong semester performance in defining their most successful experiences at River Town. These students also identified participation in internships, work on honors projects and co-curricular leadership roles as experiences with significant impact on their education. Finally, they relayed their success through reflections on personal growth as students. Recognition of achievements, signature college experiences and identified impact on their personal development help students underscore the investment they have made in themselves.

Non-Persisters

Non-Persisters demographics.

Of the original group of students selected for inclusion in this study, six students from the initial interviews and three students from the follow-up interviews had withdrawn from River Town at the time of analysis in June 2013; nine students make up this group, the Non-Persisters, in this study.

Based on information available from River Town's institutional records and student responses, the Non-Persisters represented a less diverse group than the Persisters. (See Appendix H: Demographics of All Non-Persisters for a complete summary of data.) They all self-identified as traditionally-aged students and most transferred to River Town with first-year or second-year class standing. Almost all of the students attended one college prior to River Town and most transferred from a community college. (See Appendix I for summary demographics for Non-Persisters from the initial interviews.) Only half of the students identified as Non-Persisters in the institutional data base completed a typical full-time course load, meaning that they were not on track to graduate in a timely manner.

Similar characteristics were also apparent in the group that was interviewed for this study, including that two-thirds of the non-persisting students were female, white, traditionally-aged, full-time commuter students with first-year class standing, and two-thirds of the students had attended one college previously. All had completed at least two semesters at River Town at the time of the interview (See Appendix K for summary demographics for Non-Persisters from the follow-up interviews.)

Preview of the findings.

Non-Persisters experienced challenges from the time of their arrival. They came from institutions that did not meet their expectations or did not offer their academic

program. Students also generally sought greater extracurricular opportunities than their previous institutions. They typically considered only River Town when they planned to transfer, and did so because they had a personal connection to someone in the institution.

Students fell behind on course credits immediately. Like the Persisters, they encountered difficulties transferring courses. Non-Persisters more often chose, however, to repeat courses they had already taken rather than to challenge problems they encountered with credit transfer process. They lost several courses in the transfer process, which may have contributed to their later financial and academic problems. The early decisions these students made were costly to them in many ways.

Non-Persisters' goals focused on what their degrees would help them achieve in a career, and they talked less about the steps necessary to progress toward the degree. They also identified lower academic performance goals and, in spite of hoping for more extracurricular engagement, had more limited plans to engage the campus community.

Out-of-class commitments played a strong role in student non-persistence. Like the Persisters, many Non-Persisters had significant off-campus obligations, primarily related to work. They appeared, however, to be less realistic in matching those outside obligations with their academic and social aspirations. Many Non-Persisters quickly encountered significant challenges competing for their time. Students who did not have rigorous work schedules became, in contrast, over-involved on campus, in athletics or in student organizations, which conflicted with their academic work.

Problems managing the academic side of their lives emerged quickly. Beginning their first semesters, students "fell behind" in their course progress because they took a lighter load of classes. In addition to a slow start, other problems emerged in several

areas: the course material itself; tough instructors; or the general adjustment to the academic environment at River Town. Non-Persisters often significantly altered their academic plans by adding majors or minors; these changes added time to the degree they hoped to achieve, although they were rarely taking a full load of courses.

Non-Persisters also encountered financial difficulties early that suggested that they were not managing their relationship with the financial support systems at River Town. They either carried outstanding balances on their student accounts or had not completed student loan processes. Financial strain hindered their academic performance. None the less, Non-Persisters perceived themselves as successful, when in fact, they encountered significant academic and/or issues that threatened their status as students at River Town.

Initial transition to the university

Pre-arrival characteristics. The stories told by Non-Persisters present accounts of the challenges and difficulties they encountered along their college journey. While the demographics do not differ dramatically from those of the students who persisted, although they tended to be a little younger, there are some notable differences. First, more than half of the Non-Persisters transferred with first-year class standing while a majority of the Persisters started at River Town as sophomores or juniors—Persisters generally were further along in their college careers than Non-Persisters, and were more committed to “finishing.” The decisions not to argue more forcefully for credit transfer did not bode well for success, the most noteworthy case being one who chose not to transfer any of her credits to River Town. Also striking, two of these students attended two or more institutions prior to their arrival at this institution, which meant that they had

already often lost additional credits. Every time students transfer between institutions, they typically lose some of their previously-earned credits and as a result, start “behind” at the new institution and have further to go to complete their degree.

Setting the stage for non-persistence: Misaligned priorities and mismatch of needs.

Reasons for choosing River Town. Different factors emerged in guiding these students’ decision to choose a new university for Non-Persisters.¹³ All of the students described aspects of the university as important in the decision-making that had nothing to do with academics; one-third of the Non-Persisters chose River Town to play on an athletic team; one third felt “comfortable here”; and the final third chose this university for its urban location (Participant #3, personal communication, October 8, 2008; and Participant #6, personal communication, September 8, 2008). The second most important factor identified in the analysis by two-thirds of the students was their direct connection to another person already at the university. Most of the Non-Persisters identified a strong connection to River Town that persuaded them to choose it as their collegiate home. Though non-academic reasons factored strongly for all of the Non-Persisters, two-thirds of the Non-Persisters mentioned that the institutional reputation was the reason the university appealed to them academically.

Like the Persisters, half of the students in this group also mentioned that they only considered this university when they decided to transfer, but none of them directly addressed why they made this choice instead of considering other colleges that met their search criteria. The combination of non-academic factors, their strong personal

¹³ Only the 6 Non-Persisters from the initial interviews addressed the question “Why did you choose [River Town]?”

connection to the River Town community, and the fact that “they only considered River Town” as a choice, suggests that they may not have considered the right set of criteria to meet their needs as students. Table 5.15 summarizes the primary reasons identified by Non-Persisters for choosing this institution.

Table 5.15
Non-Persisters: Reason for Choosing River Town

Primary factors for selecting the new institution	Number of students
Knew people affiliated with the university	4
Non-academic appeal	4
Academic appeal	4
Only considered this institution as a transfer option	3
Location of the institution	2
Specific university attributes	2

Note. Results compiled from the responses to Question 1 in the initial interviews.

Reasons for leaving the previous institution. Three primary factors emerged about why students decided to leave their previous institutions.¹⁴ Almost half of the Non-Persisters said the colleges were “not the right fit” (Participant #8, personal communication, February 5, 2009); they described a disparity between what their previous institution offered and their needs, whether it was a social disconnection or academic mismatch (Participants #8, #15F and #18F). One student shared the concerns which precipitated his departure:

...the atmosphere was part of it....It was so big and I got tired of it. I mean I know when you get out of freshman lectures, you don’t have the classes of 150 anymore but it was just so big...It was one of those things that I probably could have stuck it out and done fine there but I came away with kind of a bad taste in my mouth

¹⁴ Two students did not answer this question.

and was like, I'm just going to make a change and see if it helps. So I made a change (Participant #15F, personal communication, December 18, 2009).

Personal reasons, particularly their desire to pursue varsity athletics, also emerged as a prominent factor in their decision-making to leave their previous institution for half of the students in this group.¹⁵ Although, almost half of the students said they left their previous college because it did not offer the academic area they hoped to pursue or the college only offered a terminal degree, only three of nine cited this as a primary reason (Participants #8, #14 and #12F). Thus, the factors identified by the Non-Persisters are not all that different from the factors described by Persisters, but the reasons may show a tendency of Non-Persisters to identify non-academic preferences as most important. In Table 5.16, students are classified by primary rationale stated for their departure from their former institutions.

Table 5.16
Non-Persisters: Reasons for Transfer

Primary reasons for departure from previous institution	Number of students
Personal reasons	3
Not the right "fit"	3
Academic reasons	3

Note. Results compiled from responses to Question 2 in the initial interview. Students were allowed to give multiple reasons for departure.

Extrinsically-focused purpose and lower academic expectations frame Non-Persisters' motivation to complete undergraduate degree. To understand students' motivation to complete their four-year degrees, the Non-Persisters were asked to identify

factors that drove them to achieve their degree¹⁶. Like the Persisters in this study, improved job opportunities compelled the Non-Persisters to complete their degrees. One student focused, for example, on the practical need for future job security and the societal pressure he felt to get a four-year degree:

...it's one of those things where 1.) it is...expected that you need to get a 4 year degree – it's kind of proven itself but also I would certainly like some sort of future job security out of it. I would like to pay off my student loans in my lifetime and I think it's really, just, I want to accomplish it. It's a goal that – it's just something that I always assumed I would do. I got here and it's like, oh wow, it's a lot harder than I thought it was. So now I just want to do it (Participant #15F, personal communication, December 18, 2009).

Students often arrive with expectations for their experience at the university. A majority of Non-Persisters wanted to “...personally just try and do my best” but not set their sights too high (Participant #12F, personal communication, December 10, 2009). Another student wanted to “do well.... and get B's” (Participant #20, personal communication, November 2, 2010). Participant #15F shared a more descriptive goal: “To perform to the best of my abilities without having another burnout and collapse like I did in [institution name removed]” (Participant #15F, personal communication, December 18, 2009). Putting forth their best effort was their greatest aspiration. In other words, compared to the Persisters, they set academic performance expectations that were somewhat lower.

Almost half of the students focused on the co-curricular side of the college experience and wanted to be active members of the campus community:

¹⁶ 5 of 9 students responded to this question

[I want to]...be involved and to help. I really want to help better some sort of part of River Town. That's why I'm sticking with the organizations that I'm in even if some of them feel like they might not be afloat for much longer. I still want to stick with them because I feel like I can reverse that and they're important to have. I just want to keep adding (Participant #18F, personal communication, December 18, 2009).

While this particular student described a strong commitment to and goals geared towards her extra-curricular involvement, she neglected to describe any academic expectations of herself; her focus was the non-academic experience at the university.

While Persisters made it clear they wanted to achieve the highest grades or receive Dean's List honors, Non-Persisters only wanted to do their best, without defining a high standard. Non-Persisters noted their desire to be active members of the campus community to the detriment of their focus on academics. Overall, though, Non-Persisters focused more on extrinsic motivation (their future careers, societal expectations to acquire an undergraduate degree and co-curricular experiences) rather than on their intellectual and personal development.

Silence is costly: Course credit articulation. Like the Persisters, the experiences of Non-Persisters differed dramatically from each other with regard to credit transfer¹⁷. Just under half of the students had no problems transferring credits, but the majority of Non-Persisters had significant course articulation issues:

The only inconsistency that I came up with was my math credits that I was going to transfer but there was a math course that was recommended to take here for

¹⁷ 5 of 9 students responded to this question

graduation in education so I just took that this semester and then I didn't have to worry about it (Participant #12F, personal communication, December 10, 2009). Rather than challenge the university's decision, the student took the "extra" course. While she was not outwardly bothered to take an additional course, the decision and her lack of additional action cost her time and money in pursuing her degree.

Another student had great difficulty transferring credits and still had not resolved these issues after several semesters of enrollment at River Town. He was dissatisfied with the outcome of the credit transfer but chose to take the lesson this experience offered rather than challenge the university's decision:

[River Town] kept the credit value from [institution name removed]. So I dropped a credit with each of those two [courses] there and then the Introduction to Psychology never came [through as articulated credits at River Town]. I first noticed it when I went through my transcript with my adviser. It was one of those things where I wasn't really worried about losing Intro to Psychology, which is just a general. I finished my humanities and I finished my social sciences. It's 4 credits closer to graduation that I don't have to pay for again, but is it worth the hassle? Maybe, but I'm just – this far out now....Chalk it up to experience. I should have pursued that right away (Participant #15F, personal communication, December 18, 2009).

The difference of four credits at River Town is one full course, which would have put the student one class closer to graduation had he taken the appropriate action to resolve the discrepancy of his courses between institutions.¹⁸ The student seemed frustrated with the

¹⁸ River Town does not have a time limitation for transferring previously-earned credits.

process and with himself; he wished he would have taken initiative to understand his academic plan and address his concerns with transferred credits sooner (Participant #15F). This student's lack of self-advocacy cost him time, money and degree progress.

All of the Non-Persisters who encountered course articulation problems described making intentional decisions to repeat courses rather than appeal decisions (or even try) to transfer previously-earned credits. As a result, they chose not to advocate for course credits they rightfully earned. In addition, some students lost several other courses in the transfer articulation process, which exacerbated the academic and financial toll on them. The intentional decisions these students made were costly to them in many ways.

Persistence to graduation

Significant financial concerns bode poorly for Non-Persisters. Financial concerns plagued Non-Persisters soon after they enrolled and remained throughout their time at River Town. Outstanding tuition bills were an immediate trend for almost half of the students in this group, and all of those students from the initial interview group.¹⁹ At the point of the interview, students had yet to handle the remaining balances on their student bills, several weeks after the semester had begun.

As noted earlier, finances are the single most commonly cited reason for students to leave River Town. In the follow-up interviews, all of the Non-Persisters described finances playing a defining role in their ability to stay. Each student shared a different story about the hardships they experienced but two students' responses illustrate the concerns of the Non-Persisters. Participant #15F shared that his family could not afford to help him so he was left on his own to make ends meet:

¹⁹ 7 of 9 students answered these questions.

It is always a struggle to make sure that I have the funding... It's always stressful coming from a relatively low income family...knowing that there's no help beyond what I have. I look at my bank account, I know there is no cosigner, there are no funds; there's nothing available if I don't have it or if I don't borrow it. That's always a struggle, but it is not insurmountable (Participant #15F, personal communication, December 18, 2009).

Even though he described the struggle as “not insurmountable” in terms of his persistence at River Town, he said these concerns impacted his academic endeavors as he juggled work to pay his bills, to keep up in courses and to participate in athletics: His biggest concern, though, centered on the pressure he felt to pay his bills and make difficult choices:

Sometimes you're like, 'I really need to focus on this but I can't because my rent is due in a month and oh crap...coming up a little close, coming up a little close.' ... Last week I skipped [athletic] practice to pick up extra shifts, extra work, so I could make sure bills were paid. I need to focus on other things (Participant #15F, personal communication, December 18, 2009).

Throughout his responses, it was evident this student struggled continuously with his finances – but also with the goals that he set for himself as a student.

Participant #12F's concerns with finances were complicated by a disability. In order to qualify for certain state grants, she needed to take more than 15 credits per semester, which she could not manage due to her disability—she worked a few hours a week to make some money, but it was not enough to help her with everyday expenses: “I can only manage to work 6 hours a week....It's frustrating because I can't afford

anything” (Participant #12F, personal communication, December 10, 2009). This student clearly struggled to take her courses, manage her disability and meet her financial obligations.

Non-Persisters’ difficulties with finances emerged soon after their arrival to River Town. When having to make tough financial decisions, they often had to prioritize their living expenses over academics. In the end, finances overwhelmed them. Table 5.17 highlights the problems Non-Persisters identified regarding finances.

Table 5.17

Non-Persisters: Concerns about Financial Aid

Key questions or concerns about financial aid	Number of students
Had outstanding balances into their first semester	3
Concerns about paying for living expenses	2
Expressed no concern for financial aid	2

Note. Results compiled from responses to Question 12 in the initial interview and Questions 30, 31 and 32 in the follow-up interviews.

Competing responsibilities. Two-thirds of the Non-Persisters worked off-campus, with many of them working at least 20 hours per week (see Table 5.14); a couple students worked full-time jobs²⁰. More Non-Persisters worked off-campus and they worked more than Persisters. The significant work obligations of the Non-Persisters likely played a role in their decision to leave River Town. Table 5.18 summarizes students’ work obligations.

²⁰ One student who said he worked did not provide information about how much he worked.

Table 5.18
Non-Persisters: Student Work Obligations

Student work description	Number of students
Working off-campus	6
Not employed	2
On-campus work	1
Volunteer	1
Number of hours of work per week (on average) ^a	Number of students
6-10 hours	2
20-29 hours	2
Full-time employment	2

Note. Results compiled from the responses to Question 8 in initial interviews and Question 6 from the follow-up interviews.

^aOne self-reported working student did not report the number of hours of work per week.

Over-engagement outside the classroom shift priorities away from education. Of this group of Non-Persisters, more than half of the students became involved on campus quickly. Three of nine participated in varsity athletics. A few others became involved with formal student organizations while a few other students intended to get involved with a student organization or an athletic sport. Some students, however, had no intention of getting involved because they planned to prioritize academics. Table 5.19 addresses Non-Persisters' level of extracurricular engagement:

Table 5.19
Non-Persisters: Campus Involvement

Reported involvement status	Number of students
Already involved	
Participates on varsity athletic team	3
Involved with at least one student organization	2
Intends to get involved with student organizations	2
Not involved with any student organizations	2

Note. Results compiled from the responses to Question 9 in the initial interviews

Engagement on campus did not always differentiate the Non-Persisters from the Persisters. The commuting students had vastly different commitments of time out of class than the residential student. One, whose experience was common to many commuters, spent one to two hours on campus outside of class completing course-related studying, group project work or "...meeting advisers, support people or financial aid" (Participant #12F, personal communication, December 10, 2009). Her out-of-class time description was representative of the sample of Persisters.

Others tried to live out a "typical undergraduate experience" but did not learn how to manage academic obligations. Participant #15F estimated that he spent more than 30 hours per week on campus, out of class, largely due to his participation in athletics. Although he spent lots of time in the library until his athletic practice started, he pointed out that he didn't always prioritize academic work: "...sometimes you are in the library, you're sitting up there but you are not studying, you're actually just playing internet games waiting for three o'clock to roll around" (Participant #15F, personal communication, December 18, 2009). Participant #18F also prioritized her time to emphasize extracurricular interests over academics.

Either through work or co-curricular engagement, Non-Persisters described themselves as even more heavily engaged in non-academic activities than the Persisters. Regardless of the type of commitment they were aware that their over-engagement outside of class compromised their academic performance.

Signs of academic trouble emerged quickly. Academic challenges emerged quickly as the one of most salient issues for Non-Persisters, and all experienced early trouble with their academic courses and performance²¹. Reflecting on their first weeks of the semester, both respondents already described difficulty adjusting to the academic rigor and expectations of their courses, compared to their previous institutions. One student stated explicitly, "... [the classes] are more difficult than they were in [previous institution city removed]" (Participant #20, personal communication, November 2, 2010). In the follow-up interviews, Non-Persisters shared the toll adjustment took on their academic performance in their first semesters at River Town. One student believed many reasons contributed to her poor performance:

... [The] new school and just getting to know how things are done. I wasn't taking classes that I was particularly interested in. I was just trying out some stuff... They weren't my favorite classes. Well, a lot of the classes are interesting but I just don't test well in them because I'm not getting what I need from the materials so I don't do well. But they're interesting, but I'm not learning them well (Participant #12F, personal communication, December 10, 2009).

²¹ In the initial interviews, students were asked two questions: Question 6 "What classes are the most challenging and why?" and Question 7: "What is your greatest challenge this semester?" Only two students answered these questions as they were developed after students who matriculated in early semesters completed their interviews.

While some of the students acknowledged academic problems, others appeared to be in denial. One noted, for example, that: “I [don’t] really look at my GPA constantly” but later revealed she struggled in several courses:

...this year and last year, I made a bad choice in a class, but it was really easy to talk to my adviser and tell them I don’t think this is the right class... One of them [the classes] got changed and the other [class] I had to withdraw from because it wasn’t what I expected (Participant #18F, personal communication, April 29, 2010).

She admitted to being unprepared for some courses which resulted in low grades: “...there were the 2 classes that I messed up on...” (Participant #18F, personal communication, April 29, 2010). Despite working closely with her advisor to help resolve her issues, this student faced difficult academic decisions whether to stay enrolled in courses where she struggled most semesters.

Non-Persisters’ changing path to graduation detrimental. All students²² also altered their major choices after they arrived at River Town. Two-thirds of the non-persisting students added majors to what they already had planned. The other student changed his major after his arrival. Changes to students’ majors obviously add time to most students’ academic plans. For transfer students, in particular, changes in academic interests need to be completed with significant guidance to consider the academic and financial implications of these decisions.

In the follow-up interviews, students talked about their academic plan and timeline to graduation. Two of three said they were on track to graduate in a timely

²² The remainder of the data analysis focuses on responses from the 3 students who participated in the follow-up interviews, and then left River Town. They became the Non-Persisters from the follow-up interviews.

manner. Like the Persisters, the Non-Persisters used careful credit monitoring to help them understand what credits were still needed to fulfill degree requirements, but all of the Non-Persisters said they needed to take additional courses each semester or in the additional terms at River Town to ensure timely graduation. One student described this constant need of Non-Persisters to “play catch-up” with course credits:

Well, like this semester since I chose to drop a class, I’m taking a J-term class [to make up for that class]....And then just being able to take more of a full schedule [will help me earn more credits]. (Participant #12F, personal communication, December 10, 2009).

Support systems matter, but do not contribute to persistence.

Regardless of outcome, faculty are perceived to matter. All three of the Non-Persisters who participated in follow-up interviews indicated that they had strong relationships with their faculty advisors.²³ Like the Persisters, they consistently described their advisors as “available and understanding, and willing to work with you...” (Participant #12F, personal communication, December 10, 2009). Two of the three students described mentor-type relationships with their advisors. Of her advisor, one student said:

[Faculty member name removed] is wonderful. She just makes me feel so comfortable... I come in and tell her all my plans and we get everything done and then she’s like, ‘How are you?’ and we can have a conversation (Participant #18F, personal communication, April 29, 2010).

²³ 3 students responded to this question in the follow-up interviews.

The strength of their relationships and the trust they put in their advisors probably helped the students persist longer, but in the end could not overcome the deeper academic and financial issues with which Non-Persisters more notably struggled.

Friends matter. Similar to the Persisters, all of the Non-Persisters said that friends (peers) played a principal role in their ability to persist. They relied heavily on their support systems to help them survive the struggles in and out of the classroom. One student highlighted the impact of peers on his persistence and attributed his departure from his previous institution to the lack of a social network:

Having a social network is huge... Having somebody there to help you is so important to sticking it out, especially in college... You can't do it all yourself.

It's just not possible. I crashed in [institution nickname removed] because it's not possible (Participant #15F, personal communication, December 18, 2009).

For Non-Persisters, both classmates and peers (friends) seemed to play a large role in their perception of what mattered in their ability to persist, but did not make a difference in their ultimate persistence.

Connection to university resources. One of the reasons that transfer students chose River Town was because of its smaller size and perceived accessibility. Like the Persisters, Non-Persisters readily used university resources at River Town. All of the students named student affairs offices—particularly, disability resources and transfer student services, and financial aid. It is no surprise that two-thirds of the students said that the Financial Aid helped them understand their financial responsibilities given the depth of their financial concerns.

Persisters and Non-Persisters both found and used vital support systems in the faculty, on the staff, in the university offices, with classmates and friends to help them navigate their semesters. Regardless of the strength of a students' network and connection to campus resources, Non-Persisters' support systems were not enough to help them persist at River Town, though they may have helped students persist longer than they would have without their assistance.

Perceived success, masked reality. As mentioned earlier, a student's perspective on how successful they believe they are at the institution determines how well perception aligns with reality. We know these students withdrew from the institution before they graduated. These students believed they were successful. Without further explanation, one student (Participant #12F) thought she was "very successful" (Participant #12F, personal communication, December 10, 2009). Participant #18F said, "I think I've been like overly successful. I've never done as much ever in my life and I feel like I'm putting all my time to good use" (Participant #18F, personal communication, April 29, 2010). More realistically, Participant #15F believed he could have done better: "I'd say I'm 60% successful. Like I don't always accomplish [what I set out to do], but I don't think I've failed at anything yet" (Participant #18F, personal communication, December 18, 2009). These statements provide great insight into Non-Persisters' sense of self-awareness. By their own standards, they succeeded, but they did not appear to recognize the depth of their struggles and thus, did not complete their degree.

Conclusion

In summary, Non-Persisters:

- 1) Started at the university with fewer previously-earned credits and lower class standing. They chose River Town because of a personal connection to someone who was already part of the university or for non-academic reasons rather than focus on the primary purpose students should choose a college: for the academic program. They emphasized their personal connections to others at the university as a more significant reason for choosing a college.
- 2) Focused more on extrinsic motivation (future job opportunities, the need to acquire an undergraduate degree and co-curricular experiences) rather than on achievements as students.
- 3) Wanted to put forth their best effort but not set their personal standards too high while Persisters set strong performance goals for themselves.
- 4) Chose not to challenge university decisions on previously-earned credits which then required them to repeat or take additional courses to “catch up.” Either way, the Non-Persisters lacked necessary self-advocacy as exemplified by the course articulation problems they described.
- 5) Had persistent financial woes which began upon arrival. They often had to prioritize paying their living expenses over paying a tuition bill or doing the work they needed to complete for their courses.
- 6) Were over-committed outside of the classroom (with work, athletics or student organizations) which took a toll on their academic engagement.
- 7) Experienced early difficulties with their academic courses and performance that, more often, than Persisters, resulted in withdrawal or failures in courses. These troubles exacerbated their problem of already being “behind” from

course articulation problems. Furthermore, they added or changed their majors after their arrival which meant changing their academic plans and adding time to their completion timeline.

- 8) Believed they were doing well at River Town and highlighted examples of their success, but they lacked self-awareness about the depth of their student problems and its impact on their persistence.

Their perpetual academic and financial concerns, a changing path to graduation, over-engagement outside of class with work or extra-curricular involvement, and skewed priorities, made it difficult for these students to persist.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

Summary

This qualitative study has examined the experience of transfer students in higher education to identify the most salient factors that influence their success. The study was designed to investigate both the factors that facilitate a relatively seamless *transition* for transfer students in the first weeks of their first semester at a new institution, and the academic, social, financial and environmental experiences that contributed to or created challenges for their path to persisting to a completion of the Bachelors degree.

The results of this study suggest that:

- 1) An important component of successful transition involves early planning, often before matriculation. In particular, an accurate evaluation of previously-earned credits that are eligible for transfer, a reasonable well-developed academic plan and timeline to graduation, and a thorough understanding of their financial aid packages frame students' expectations for their experience at a new university.
- 2) In addition to these early efforts to “manage” the technical details of transfer, successful transition involves negotiating supportive relationships on campus. Once they have begun classes, students who persist effectively advocate for themselves in the classroom, seek resources, and utilize faculty and staff to help them navigate the new academic expectations, policies, processes, and structures of the university.
- 3) Once students are on campus there is evidence that successful transition, particularly through the inevitable bumps involved in negotiating a new institution, are supported by a personal academic story in which they envision

their success by setting high standards for themselves and short-term goals to meet as they progressed to graduation.

- 4) Finally, Persisters prioritized their education over other obligations and expressed a clear desire to learn and grow as students and scholars.

The following sections will summarize the results found to address each research question, the implications for theory and the implications for practice.

Question 1: What factors facilitate successful transition to a new institution?

The results show that creating appropriate expectations for the students' new university experiences matter in their transition. Consistent with Lee (2001) and Rhine et al. (2000), students must have an accurate evaluation of courses articulated and clear path to resolve any discrepancies to "enhance their chances of movement through the educational pipeline" (Lee, 2001, p.40). Students must work closely with an academic advisor to set a realistic timeline to graduation and define which courses to take to achieve that goal. In line with what Berger and Malaney (2003), Alpern (2000) and Davies and Casey (1999) found, transfer students need to have a thorough understanding of their financial obligations for greater satisfaction and ultimately their persistence; financial trouble arose immediately for Non-Persisters with outstanding tuition bills or unfulfilled student loan processes. Persisters and Non-Persisters noted that orientation, specific to transfer students, with programs that connect new transfers with faculty, staff and university resources, as well as meet other new students benefitted their academic and social integration to the university (Richardson & King, 1995).

Persisters chose River Town for reasons that balanced their curricular, co-curricular and personal needs. Non-Persisters chose this university for already-existing

personal connections or non-academic reasons; these reasons did not align with their needs as students and the institution may not have been the right choice for them from the start. Like G. Kearney et al. (1995), Persisters were intent on graduating from this university. Non-Persisters were intent on getting the degree but did not clearly define what they needed to do to achieve the degree or shift priorities to ensure they made progress to graduation. Persisters set high academic expectations for themselves and set short-term goals to help them take steps toward graduation and they defined advanced learning as part of their educational goals. Persisters adjusted easily to the new academic environment after the initial and characteristic drop in their first semester's grade point averages at a new university (Diaz, 1992; Hill, 1965; Ishitani, 2008; and Rhine et al. 2000). Finally, they relied on their strong connections with faculty and staff to guide them to appropriate resources and support and advocated for themselves when it was needed.

From the beginning, transfer students need accurate and timely course articulation, a complete understanding of the financial obligations to the institution, a defined academic path to graduation and close collaboration with faculty and staff to ensure that students achieve this goal. Transfer students need to have internal motivation to complete the degree, hold themselves to high standards to meet short-term goals they set for themselves along the way, and effectively advocate for themselves when concerns arise. These identified factors ensure a smooth transition to a new institution and set the foundation for continued persistence.

Question 2: What key elements facilitate their persistence to graduation for transfer students?

Pre-arrival student profile. Persisters began their collegiate career at River Town with sophomore or junior standing. They already took several years of courses at other institutions and made significant progress toward their undergraduate degrees. This finding is consistent with existing research (Ishitani, 2008). Persisters at River Town also were older than Non-Persisters and considered themselves part of the non-traditional student population. Many of the Persisters attended several institutions prior to River Town and characterized what G. Kearney et al. (1995) called “Ultimate Persisters;” Ultimate Persisters are students who, despite the number of transfers, remain focused on achieving their degree and leave institutions when their needs are not met or are not helping them complete their degree. Non-Persisters completed fewer credits at their previous institutions and more of them arrived with first-year standing, which meant they had further to go to complete their degrees. Non-Persisters also represented a traditionally-aged college student population. In this study, class standing upon arrival and student age, and identification as a “non-traditional student” factor into transfer student persistence.

Clear and uninterrupted path to graduation. Persisters worked closely with their academic advisors and other faculty to ensure their timely progress to graduation. When they did not receive credit for courses from their previous institutions through the articulation process, they appealed the university’s decisions and followed through to make sure they received as many credits as possible when they transferred. They chose their academic interests before they arrived and stuck to those paths as they continued to take courses toward their degree. They closely monitored their own academic progress to

help them understand their status and succeed in their classes to earn sufficient credits toward their degree.

Non-Persisters, on the other hand, repeated courses they took at previous institutions or chose not to transfer course credits already earned; they did not advocate for themselves through the course articulation process and as a result, more often, began their new college experience already “behind.” After they enrolled at River Town, they altered their academic plan by either adding a major or changing their field of study. These revisions required them to take different courses than originally planned and likely added to the time they would need to complete their degrees. More Non-Persisters enrolled part-time or described a consistent pattern of poor academic performance which led to either course withdrawal or failure; they made inconsistent progress toward their degrees. Non-Persisters fell behind from the beginning in the transfer of previously-earned credits and remained behind by taking too few courses or doing poorly in their courses.

Transfer student persistence is influenced by close alignment of previously-earned credits to the new university’s general education and major requirements, a clear academic plan and strong course performance to allow students to progress consistently toward their degree, and an intentional partnership with academic advisors to help students navigate their way to an undergraduate degree.

Adequate financial support. Finances are the most commonly stated reason for leaving at River Town. Persisters were able to pay their educational costs, which, according to Cabrera, et al. (1990), ability to pay impacts their academic and social integration as well as commitment to their education and in turn, their persistence. As

discussed earlier, though, many Persisters expressed concerns about paying their personal expenses, but their concerns did not impact their persistence. Non-Persisters discussed two sources of unresolved financial trouble: struggles to pay their tuition bills and monthly living needs. Concerns about finances for Non-Persisters emerged immediately upon arrival, and continued to plague these students at the time of the follow-up interviews, and conceivably beyond. While this is a subtle difference, it reflects the breadth and depth of their difficulties in managing their finances. There is no evidence that the Persisters came from a more financially advantaged background, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that they were more strategic about finances as well as about their academic plans.

Drive to finish and set high standards. Persisters identified a strong desire to complete their undergraduate degrees and also defined short-term academic performance goals to help them see their progress and achieve academic success. These findings are consistent with Pascarella (1991, 2005). Non-Persisters expressed a similar desire to complete their degrees, but they only saw the benefits of completing the degree and did not expressly discuss their plan to meet the larger goal, particularly when it came to academic progress and financial obligations. They also set their lower performance standards than Persisters. Non-Persisters wanted to “do well” academically, and according to Yazedjian et al. (2008) the desire alone to do well by their own expectations should have contributed to their academic success and persistence, but these students did not perform well or consistently in the classroom and this directly contributed to their departure. Persisters held themselves to higher standards to get the A or make the Dean’s list and achieved their goals. Students’ motivation, their perceptions of success and

setting high standards for their academic performance played a strong role in transfer student persistence.

Prioritize education. With a higher percentage of non-traditional students as Persisters in this study, Persisters focused directly on their educational goals and had successful time-management skills to balance in- and out-of-class commitments more effectively than their younger Non-Persister counterparts, even though they expressed the stress this balance caused them (Compton, et al. 2006; Richardson & King, 1998; Tinto, 1987). Persisters in this study provide evidence against Tinto's (1975, 1987) concept of isolation as it relates to student persistence. He suggested students who cannot engage on campus beyond the classroom experience isolation which often leads to departure; Persisters from River Town did not allow their limited engagement to interfere with their goals of completion. These findings also counter the work of Braxton et al. (2004). The findings in this study also are inconsistent with Kuh (1995), who found that working off-campus does not lead to negative student persistence, but the Non-Persisters in this study worked for more hours per week, on average, than the Persisters. If they were not working more, the Non-Persisters tended to over-commit themselves with extra-curricular interests and described themselves in ways that indicated that they may have placed a lower priority on academics.

In summary, Non-Persisters know what they want but they do not know how to be successful. Persisters have figured out what they want and how to be successful in getting it. In this study, prioritizing education and effective management of out-of-class commitments play a strong role in persistence.

Co-curricular involvement. Contrary to the National Survey of Student Engagement results (2008), the findings of this study show that all of the transfer students felt connected, actively engaged with co-curricular experiences, reported frequent and strong interaction with faculty, and a highly supportive campus environment, though their outcomes were different. Nationally, transfer students often are less engaged in and out of the classroom, this does not seem to represent the River Town transfer student experience (NSSE, 2008).

Support for Astin's Theory of Involvement (1985, 1999) was inconsistent in this study. According to Astin, the more involved students become, the more they learn and the more likely they will be to complete college. For Persisters, this theory holds true, but several Non-Persisters who were actively involved on campus in athletics or student organizations, their time commitment to these activities detracted from their academics and thus, made them less likely to persist (Astin, 1985, 1999).

Limitations

The existing research on transfer students pales in comparison to traditional first-year students; as the segment of students in higher education with the greatest growth, there is a great need for more research that helps universities understand how to facilitate success in this population of students. This study examines how the most prominent models of student success and persistence apply to a largely unstudied but growing part of college student populations. This lack of research on transfer student experiences, success, and persistence necessitates a small exploratory study to guide future studies. Without much to build upon, this research helps to identify salient factors of success and

persistence and their impact on transfer students' progression toward degree completion or departure from an institution.

As a small qualitative study, the most significant limitation of this study is the sample size and scope of institutions included. This study focuses on one small, private university and a small population of transfer students ($n=48$; Persisters=39, Non-Persisters= 9). Using a larger sample size at multiple institutions would greatly improve the validity of the findings, particularly for Non-Persisters. However, for a preliminary study of an institution with the commitment of River Town's to improvement of transfer student success and transition, the convenience of the sample and location are minor compared to the richness of the data gained.

From the institutional data, we do not know why all Non-Persisters ultimately departed River Town. Interviews with Non-Persisters post-departure would shed light on their specific reasons for leaving and their experiences that lead to their withdrawal. With that vital information, institutions could identify improvements to make in their admissions processes or review programs, services and policies that may have led students to change based on feedback from more students who did not persist.

The initial interview question protocol was not uniform in the years these data were collected because the interviews were designed as an early intervention program to assist transfer students in their transitions at River Town. Each year, the questions were refined to address more common concerns revealed by the aggregate transfer student population at River Town for early identification of issues that lead to frustration, dissatisfaction, and departure. The initial interview notes were taken by the staff person and entered into the institutional database. They were not taken with the intent to use

them for research purposes and are subject to the interpretation of the staff person conducting the interview.

Most of the data collected from these interviews is self-reported. Self-reported data present limitations to this study because of the difficulty to verify the accuracy of the memories students share when asked to reflect on their past experiences.

Implications for Theory

This study was designed to examine the complex interplay of factors that influence transfer student persistence. Much of the existing research focuses on first-year student retention (Tinto 1975, 1987), but significant parts of his Theory of Student Departure apply to transfer students, with regard to academic and social integration. Tinto argued the primary reasons for student departure are intention and commitment. Persisters described strong intention and commitment to achieving their degree and through effective adjustment and successful academic performance became academically integrated into the university. While Non-Persisters also described a strong intention and commitment to completing their degree, they also had significant adjustment issues and difficulties that arose interfered with their ability to achieve their goal. Adjustment and difficulty are two of four outcomes Tinto (1975, 1987) suggests link to student departure. However, Tinto's (1975, 1987) model fails to address the importance of finances (or financial management skills) to transfer students' ability to persist.

External factors played an important role in the lives both Persisters and Non-Persisters, which is consistent with Bean's (1980) Theory of Student Attrition. The findings on the role of finances for Non-Persisters lend support to Bean's (1980) concept as well as research conducted by Cabrera et al. (1990). But the authors that emphasize

external factors pay more attention to predictors than to how students manage the factors that affect them. For example, both groups of students had financial problem; the Persisters appear to have been more effective at managing them. Both Non-Persisters and Persisters had more friends and “support” off campus than on campus—but Persisters pointed to their off-campus relationships as helping them to stay focused and on track. Both groups had the external factor of transfer credits, but Persisters transferred more credits from similar institutions (both two and four-year colleges) successfully, which fed into their better financial management strategies. Persisters in this study were faced with challenges through their time at River Town, but showed resilience that was not seen in the Non-Persisters.

Thus, the transfer students in this study bring forth many more factors for persistence beyond what Tinto (1975, 1987) and Bean (1980) posit are primary factors. The findings suggest that in addition to academic and social integration, entry characteristics, economic and psychological components are also instrumental in considering transfer student persistence which is consistent with the research by Braxton, et al. (2004).

Implications for Research

Transfer student persistence is a dynamic set of factors that impact a student’s ability to remain at an institution. These influences affect the success of a student from the admissions process to graduation. As these findings demonstrate, more refined research is needed to develop a theory of persistence for transfer students to address the specific needs and challenges of these students, who represent one of the fastest growing segments of the college student population. Further research also should consider the role

of non-traditional student status, students' residential status and distinct institutional features in this theory development (Braxton et al. 2004).

As an exploratory study, it is not surprising that one concludes that more research is needed. In particular there is a need for additional investigations about the particular strategies that Persisters use to overcome obstacles, or whether there are common flaws in the choices made by Non-Persisters that could contribute to a more detailed theory of the transfer process. More information is also needed about the details of financial aid, and how it affects persistence, as this study did not examine the adequacy or type of the financial support transfer students received and the strategies they used to support their monthly living costs. Most importantly, more research is needed to determine how transfer students' remaining financial aid eligibility for grants and loans impacted their need to work and ultimately, their persistence. Additionally, two particular subpopulations of transfer students, non-traditional students and commuter students, need further investigation to learn how these roles interact to positively or negatively impact transfer students' success and persistence.

Implications for Practice: The Role of the Institution

Clearly defined processes for course articulation. Universities need to continually evaluate their course articulation process, and work to translate as many courses as possible and provide a clear process for students to appeal the university's decisions. Providing timely evaluations to students with a summary of how their previously-earned credits toward the major and graduation credits are critical to helping students settle into their academic life at the new university. In addition, the sooner

students know about issues that arise with previously-earned credits, the sooner they can begin to resolve the problems.

Effective intrusive advising and early intervention. Academic advisors and designated staff need to serve as student advocates to help them navigate these processes. Persisters clearly identified a close collaboration with their faculty advisors as one of the means they used to ensure their success as students. Academic advisors need to help students advocate for themselves as well. As we understand from the experience of Non-Persisters in this study, they chose not to challenge the university decisions. With effective guidance from academic advisors and staff, students could not choose to lose previously-earned credits because they would not navigate the appeals process of course articulation on their own; the result would allow them to start at the university with a clear academic plan and path to graduation. Academic advisors would also monitor student academic performance and design individualized interventions and strategies to help students improve their course preparation when they show signs of struggle.

Universities also need to work closely with transfer students if they plan to alter their major choices because any change to a transfer student's academic plan often means additional courses, additional semesters and additional tuition expenses. All of the Non-Persisters in this study made changes to their major after they arrived. With a shortened time to meet a new university's major and liberal education requirements, changes to the academic plan must be examined closely to identify the implications to a student's timeline to graduation and to students' financial eligibility and obligations to the university.

Clear understanding of financial obligations to the university and monthly living needs. In the admissions process, universities need to develop and review a comprehensive financial aid plan, similar to the academic plan, so students know what to expect each semester through graduation. Members of the financial aid staff would complete these reviews before a student commits to the university and then review the plan with students annually to discuss how the student plans to meet their economic obligations to the institutions.

Specifically trained and designated staff/office to provide guidance, programs and opportunities to utilize university resources. Persisters and Non-Persisters named orientation as an essential program to help them connect with key faculty and staff resources as well as meet other students. This non-academic office would host relevant orientation programming and continue to serve the needs of transfer students through graduation, both through programming and individual holistic support of the transfer students' experiences. The primary purpose of these staff members would be to help students identify short and long-term goals students hope to accomplish and work to hold them accountable to the goals. This office would provide guide students to career-building opportunities on campus and collaborate with other offices at the university to provide effective resources for academic, social and financial integration. On a broader scale, this office would serve as advocates for changes to policies and resources needed to help students maximize their transfer student experience at the university.

Allocation of university funding to support transfer student resources and programming. To support clear course articulation, effective intrusive student advising,

relieve student financial burden, and develop a central office for transfer student services, the university must prioritize these students needs and fund essential staff positions, programming and financial initiatives necessary to facilitate transfer student persistence. Transfer students provide great revenue sources for universities and the investment to keep enrolled students at the university through graduation is worth the costs.

Conclusion

This study provides a detailed set of factors for institutions to improve transfer students' experiences and success in the enrollment, integration and support of transfer students from the time of arrival to their graduation. The results of this research show that transfer students have a different set of needs that need to be addressed and aligned with institutional practices to ensure transfer student success. Based on the findings of this study, more in-depth research is needed to revise student success and retention theories to reflect the types of college student populations that are on our college campuses today. Using frameworks for theory and practice that are steeped in the traditional student population of 18-year olds who go directly to college is no longer relevant.

Transfer students' undergraduate degree completion has begun to play an increasingly critical role as the national political agenda to improve degree attainment for all citizens (White House, 2009). Carnevale and Rose (2011) drew attention in *The Undereducated American* to the need for at least 20 million U.S. workers with post-secondary degrees. Of that 20 million, at least 15 million need to have bachelor's degrees (Carnevale & Rose, 2011). Consider these points along with a decline in the traditional 18-year-old college age student population and the conclusion becomes evident: colleges and universities can no longer afford to ignore the issues for transfer students because this

student population has become critical to institutions' vitality and more importantly, to the nation's economic well-being.

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Appendix A
Demographic Comparison of Transfer Student Population at River Town
University and All Study Participants

		Fall 2008-Fall 2010	All study participants
Gender	Female	55.2%	66.7%
	Male	44.8%	33.3%
Race/Ethnicity	White	66.3%	64.6%
	Students of Color	22.8%	20.8%
	International	3.5%	2.1%
	Unknown	7.4%	12.5%
Residential status	On-campus	27.9%	27.1%
	Off- campus	72.1%	72.9%
Credits taken in first semester	Full-time (12.01+ credits)	68.6%	75%
	Minimal full-time (12 credits)	28.5%	18.8%
	Part-time (0-11.99 credits)	2.9%	6.2%
Student class standing upon arrival	First Year (0-31.99 credits)	30.9%	29.2%
	Second Year (32-63.99 credits)	46.4%	33.3%
	Junior (64-95.99 credits)	20.5%	31.3%
	Senior (96+ credits)	2.2%	0
	Unknown	0	6.2%
Previous institution type:	Community College	57.1%	54.2%
	4-year college	42.9%	45.8%

Appendix B

Initial Interview Protocol

New Transfer Student Interview Questions Fall 2008 and Spring 2009

1. What courses are you taking this fall? How are they going?
2. Do you know who your faculty advisor is? Have you met him or her?
3. In what activities do you plan to be involved at Hamline?
4. Why did you choose Hamline?
5. What other colleges did you consider?
6. Do you have any questions about how your credits transferred to Hamline?
7. Did you have any questions about your financial aid package or any issues with finances?

New Transfer Student Interview Questions Fall 2009, Spring 2010, Fall 2010

1. Why did you choose Hamline?
2. What other colleges did you consider besides Hamline?
3. Why did you leave your previous institution?
4. How many institutions did you attend previous to Hamline? Please name all of them.
5. What classes are you taking this fall?
6. Which class are you enjoying the most?
7. Which class is most challenging? Why?
8. What do you think your greatest challenge will be this semester?
9. Do you work? If yes, where and how many hours per week?
10. What organizations or activities are you involved in on-campus? Off-campus?

11. What are your expectations for yourself while you are in college at Hamline?
12. What are your expectations of Hamline?
13. Do you have any questions about your financial aid package?
14. Do you have any questions or concerns about how to pay for this semester or future semester? If yes, what are these questions or concerns?
15. Have you received your transcript evaluation? Do you have any questions about how your credits transferred to Hamline?
16. What sessions in orientation were the most useful? Least useful?
17. What are some things you would change about TRANSFERmation Orientation?

Appendix C

Follow-Up Interview Protocol

Demographics:

- 1) Which best describes you?
☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Transgender
☐ Intersex

- 2) How do you identify ethnically/racially?
☐ African American, African, Black,
☐ Native American, Alaska Native
☐ Asian American (please specify country of origin) _____
☐ Asian (including Indian subcontinent) (please specify country of origin) _____
☐ Hispanic, Latino (please specific country of origin) _____
☐ Mexican American, Chicano
☐ Puerto Rican
☐ Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander
☐ White
☐ Other (please specify)

- 3) Where do you live?
☐ Less than 1 mile from campus with parents/ family
☐ Less than 1 mile from campus without parents/family
☐ More than 1 mile from campus with parents/family
☐ More than 1 mile from campus without parents/family

- 4) My age is:
☐ 18-22 years old
☐ 23-27 years old
☐ 28-32 years old
☐ 33-40 years old
☐ Over 40 years old

- 5) What is your enrollment status?
☐ Part-time student (less than 12 credits)
☐ Full-time student (12 or more credits)

- 6) I am employed and work (either on or off-campus)
☐ 1-5 hours per week
☐ 6-10 hours per week
☐ 11-15 hours per week
☐ 16-20 hours per week
☐ 21-30 hours per week

- _____ 31-40 hours per week
 _____ More than 40 hours per week
 _____ I am not employed

- 7) Do you work on- or off-campus?
 8) How many children/dependents do you have under the age of 18 that live with you?
 _____ Zero
 _____ 1
 _____ 2
 _____ 3
 _____ 4
 _____ 5 or more
- 9) How many semesters of coursework have you completed at this institution?
 10) How many credits did you transfer into this institution?
 11) Total number of credits completed:
 12) Have you completed an internship while at this institution?
 13) Have you completed a study abroad program while at this institution?
 14) Why did you leave your previous institution?
 15) How many institutions did you attend prior to this institution?

Academic:

- 1) Are you on track with your graduation requirements? With course work in your major?
- 2) Did your major change from the time you enrolled at this institution to the time you formally declared your major?
 - a. If yes, what prompted the change in your major?
- 3) When do you anticipate graduating?
- 4) Is your anticipated graduation on the timeline you had when you enrolled at this institution?
 - a. If yes, how did you stay on track?
 - b. If no, what obstacles did you encounter in your progress to graduation?
- 5) Was your grade point average during your first semester at this institution higher, lower or the same as at your previous institution?
 - a. If your grade point average was higher or lower, to what do you attribute the change?
- 6) Did your grade point average rise, fall or remain the same after your first semester at Hamline?
 - a. If there was a rise or fall, to what do you attribute the change?
- 7) Describe your experience in transferring credits to this institution.
- 8) How quickly were any problems with credit transfer resolved?
- 9) What role did your orientation to this institution play in your transition as a student
 - a. How did this orientation compare to your previous institution?
- 10) Describe your relationship with your faculty adviser.

- 11) What relationships have you built with other faculty members?
- 12) What role has faculty played in your success here?
- 13) How would you characterize the classroom climate for transfer students?
- 14) What experiences (either in or out of the classroom) have had the greatest impact on your educational experience?

Personal:

- 15) Who provides you with the greatest support to complete your education?
- 16) What do you expect of yourself as a student while at this institution?
- 17) What is your motivation to complete your degree at this institution?
- 18) What obstacles (on- or off-campus) have you encountered during your time at this institution?
 - a. Are they still obstacles for you?
 - b. How have you overcome (or worked to overcome) them?
- 19) What successes have you encountered during your time at this institution?
 - a. To what factors do you attribute these successes?
- 20) What are your plans after graduation?

Campus Connections:

- 21) Please identify what organizations and activities with which you have been involved:
 - a. On-campus?
 - b. Off-campus?
- 22) How much time outside of class are you spending on campus and for what purpose?
- 23) What types of events have you attended: Choices: sports, academic lectures, service-related, religious, student activities, diversity
- 24) What role has connections with your classmates played in your persistence at this institution?
- 25) What role has connections with your peers played in your persistence at this institution?
- 26) What is missing from the support we provide to transfer students?
- 27) Looking back on your entry as a transfer student, what would you have changed about your time here?

Final Reflections:

- 28) Would you pick this institution again to complete your bachelor's degree?
- 29) Do you plan to complete your bachelor's degree here?
 - a. If not, why not?
- 30) Identify offices, services and people who have contributed to your persistence as a student and how they have done so.
- 31) What are your general thoughts about what makes transfer students succeed and graduate with their bachelors' degrees?

Appendix D

Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Monita Mohammadian Gray

Created November 26, 2009

Alternative Voices of the Undergraduate Experience: Attributes and Barriers to Successful Transition and Persistence of Transfer Students at a Four-Year Institution

PURPOSE

The researcher conducting a study on what fosters transfer student success at a new institution and what contributes to persistence to graduation at a four-year institution is Monita Mohammadian Gray, Doctor of Philosophy candidate at the University of Minnesota in Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development, Higher Education. I would like permission to enroll you as a participant in this study. The purposes of this research are:

To identify factors impacting successful transition of transfer students to a new university.

To determine what elements are critical to transfer student persistence to graduation.

PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in a forty-five minute face-to face or telephone interview. You will be asked a series of questions regarding your academic and personal experiences as well as campus connections with regard to your success as a student at this institution.

RISKS AND BENEFITS TO BEING IN THIS STUDY

There are no known risks for participation in this study. Every effort will be taken to reduce or eliminate any possible discomfort to you that may occur as a result of participation in the study. You may decline to answer any question asked.

There are no benefits for participation in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

This interview will be digitally recorded so that the interviewer can listen to your comments and not have to take copious notes. The recordings are confidential. They will be listened to only by project staff and a professional transcriptionist. The

recordings will not contain your name or any other direct identifiers. Once the study has completed, all of the recordings will be destroyed or deleted.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS:

You may ask any questions you may have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me by e-mail at mgray03@hamline.edu or by phone at (651) 283-6742.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), contact Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware Street Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; telephone (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of Investigator _____ Date _____

Appendix E
Permission to Use Existing Institutional Data

November 2, 2010

To the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board:

I am writing to you regarding Monita Mohammadian Gray's dissertation and her IRB proposal which uses existing data collected at [REDACTED]. She has collected the survey, focus group and interview data she will use to support her dissertation as part of her job responsibilities to [REDACTED]. She uses this data to assess what transfer students need to have a smooth transition to a new university and to ensure their success to graduation.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Dean of Students

[REDACTED]

Appendix F Institutional Review Board Approval

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Twin Cities Campus

*Human Research Protection Program
Office of the Vice President for Research*

*D528 Mayo Memorial Building
420 Delaware Street S.E.
MMC 820
Minneapolis, MN 55455*

*Office: 612-626-5654
Fax: 612-626-6061
E-mail: irb@umn.edu or jhr@umn.edu
Website: <http://research.umn.edu/subjects/>*

11/29/2010

Monita M Gray
1581 Alameda Street
Saint Paul, MN 55117-3401

RE: "The Alternative Voices of the Undergraduate Experience: Attributes and Barriers to Successful Transition and Persistence of Transfer Students at Four-Year Institutions"
IRB Code Number: **1011P92853**

Dear Ms. Gray:

The referenced study was reviewed by expedited review procedures and approved on November 24, 2010. If you have applied for a grant, this date is required for certification purposes as well as the Assurance of Compliance number which is FWA00000312 (Fairview Health Systems Research FWA00000325, Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare FWA 00004003). Approval for the study will expire one year from that date. A report form will be sent out two months before the expiration date.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval of this study includes the consent form received November 15, 2010 and recruitment e-mail received November 15, 2010.

The IRB would like to stress that subjects who go through the consent process are considered enrolled participants and are counted toward the total number of subjects, even if they have no further participation in the study. Please keep this in mind when calculating the number of subjects you request. This study is currently approved for 600 subjects. If you desire an increase in the number of approved subjects, you will need to make a formal request to the IRB.

The code number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

As the Principal Investigator of this project, you are required by federal regulations to inform the IRB of any proposed changes in your research that will affect human subjects. Changes should not be initiated until written IRB approval is received. Unanticipated problems and adverse events should be reported to the IRB as they occur. Research projects are subject to continuing review and renewal. If you have any questions, call the IRB office at 612-626-5654.

On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success with your research.

Appendix G Demographics of All Persisters

Gender	Female.....	25
	Male.....	14
Race/Ethnicity	White.....	24
	Asian American.....	6
	Native American/Alaska Native.....	1
	African American/Black.....	1
	Other, not specified.....	1
	Not reported.....	6
Self-identification as traditional or non-traditional student	Traditional.....	24
	Non-traditional.....	11
	Not answered.....	4
Residential status:	Lived on-campus.....	11
	Lived off-campus.....	28
Student load status upon arrival	Full-time (12.01+ credits).....	31
	Minimal full-time (12 credits).....	8
	Part-time (0-11.99 credits).....	0
Student class standing upon arrival	First Year (0-31.99 credits).....	9
	Second Year (32-63.99 credits).....	14
	Junior (64-95.99 credits).....	13
	Unknown.....	3
Previous institution type	Two-year, public.....	18
	Two-year, private.....	1
	Four-year, public.....	11
	Four-year, private.....	8
	For-profit.....	1
Number of previous institutions attended	One.....	26
	Two.....	10
	Three or more.....	3

Note. Data either directly from the student or retrieved from the university's institutional database.

Appendix H

Demographics of All Non-Persisters

Gender	Female.....	7
	Male.....	2
Race/Ethnicity	White.....	7
	Native American/Alaska Native.....	2
Self-identification as traditional or non-traditional student	Traditional.....	8
	Non-traditional.....	1
Residential status	Lived on-campus.....	7
	Lived off-campus.....	2
Student load status upon arrival	Full-time (12.01+ credits).....	5
	Minimal full-time (12 credits).....	3
	Part-time (0-11.99 credits).....	1
Student class standing upon arrival	First Year (0-31.99 credits).....	5
	Second Year (32-63.99 credits).....	2
	Junior (64-95.99 credits).....	2
Previous institution type	Two-year, public.....	7
	Four-year, public.....	4
Number of previous institutions attended	One.....	7
	Two.....	1
	Three	1

Note. Data either directly from the student or retrieved from the university's institutional database.

Appendix I
Initial Interviews: Demographics of Persisters

Gender	Female.....	22
	Male.....	14
Race/Ethnicity	White.....	21
	Asian American.....	6
	Native American/Alaska Native.....	1
	African American/Black.....	1
	Other, not specified.....	1
	Not reported.....	6
Self-identification as traditional or non-traditional student	Traditional.....	22
	Non-traditional.....	10
	Not answered.....	4
Residential status	Lived on-campus.....	11
	Lived off-campus.....	25
Student load status upon arrival	Full-time (12.01+ credits).....	28
	Minimal full-time (12 credits).....	8
	Part-time (0-11.99 credits).....	0
Student class standing upon arrival	First Year (0-31.99 credits).....	9
	Second Year (32-63.99 credits).....	14
	Junior (64-95.99 credits).....	10
	Unknown.....	3
Previous institution type	Two-year, public.....	18
	Two-year, private.....	1
	Four-year, public.....	7
	Four-year, private.....	9
Number of previous institutions attended	One.....	24
	Two.....	9
	Three or more.....	3

Note. Data either directly from the student or retrieved from the university's institutional database.

Appendix J
Follow-Up Interviews: Demographics of Persisters

Gender	Female.....	12
	Male.....	4
Race/Ethnicity	White.....	13
	Asian American.....	1
	Hispanic/Latino.....	1
	Other, not specified.....	1
Self-identification as traditional or non-traditional student	Traditional.....	10
	Non-traditional.....	6
Residential status	Lived on-campus.....	3
	Lived off-campus.....	13
Student class standing upon arrival	First Year (0-31.99 credits).....	2
	Second Year (32-63.99 credits).....	2
	Junior (64-95.99 credits).....	4
	Senior (96+ credits).....	8
Previous institution type	Two-year, public.....	7
	Two-year, private.....	1
	Four-year, public.....	3
	Four-year, private.....	7
Number of previous institutions attended	One.....	12
	Two.....	3
	Three or more.....	1

Note. Data either directly from the student or retrieved from the university's institutional database. Several students had attended more than one institution prior to their arrival at River Town. The total number of previous institutions attended exceeds the number of students who participated in the interviews.

Appendix K
Initial Interviews: Demographics of Non-Persisters

Gender	Female.....	5
	Male.....	1
Race/Ethnicity	White.....	5
	Native American/Alaska Native.....	1
Self-identification as traditional or non-traditional student	Traditional.....	6
Residential status	Lived on-campus.....	1
	Lived off-campus.....	5
Student load status upon arrival	Full-time (12.01+ credits).....	3
	Minimal full-time (12 credits).....	1
	Part-time (0-11.99 credits).....	2
Student class standing upon arrival	First Year (0-31.99 credits).....	3
	Second Year (32-63.99 credits).....	2
	Junior (64-95.99 credits).....	1
Previous institution type	Two-year, public.....	4
	Four-year, public.....	2
Number of previous institutions attended	One.....	5
	Two.....	1

Note. Data either directly from the student or retrieved from the university's institutional database.

Appendix L
Follow-Up Interviews: Demographics of Non-Persisters

Gender	Female.....	2
	Male.....	1
Race/Ethnicity	White.....	2
	African American.....	1
Self-identification as traditional or non-traditional student	Traditional.....	2
	Non-Traditional.....	1
Residential status	Lived on-campus.....	1
	Commuter student.....	2
Enrollment status at interview time	Full-time (12+ credits).....	2
	Part-time (0-11 credits).....	1
Student class standing upon arrival	First Year (0-31.99 credits).....	2
	Junior (64-95.99 credits).....	1
Class standing at interview time	First-Year (0-31.99 credits).....	1
	Second-Year (32-63.99 credits).....	1
	Junior (64-95.99 credits).....	1
Semesters completed at River Town at interview time	2 semesters.....	2
	3 semesters.....	1
Previous institution type	Two-year, public.....	3
	Four-year, public.....	2
Number of previous institutions attended	One.....	2
	Three.....	1

Note. All previous institutions counted when calculating the “type of previous institution attended.”

Appendix M

How Persisters Spend Their Time Outside of Class

Commuter students:

Amount of time spent on campus (outside of class) per week:

Not specified.....	4
0-2 hours.....	4
5-10 hours.....	2
20-30 hours.....	1
30+ hours.....	1

Purpose of their time:

Class-related studying and activities.....	11
On-campus work.....	3
Eating.....	2
Team practices/team activities	2

On-campus students:

Purpose of their time:

Eating.....	3
Getting exercise/recreation	3
Studying/homework.....	2
Spending time with friends.....	2

Student Involvement:

Campus Organizations.....	8
Sports.....	6
Student leadership positions.....	2
Honors student organizations.....	2
No involvement.....	5

Activities attended (both on-campus and commuter students combined):

Student activities/student-sponsored events.	8
Sports.....	7
Academic lectures.....	6
Fine arts.....	3
Has not attended any events.....	5

Note. Question 35 in the follow-up interviews: “How much time outside of class are you spending on campus and for what purpose?” (For students who live on-campus, how do you spend your time outside of class?)

Question 34 in the follow-up interviews: “Please identify what organizations and activities with which you have been involved on-campus.”

Question 36 in the follow-up interviews: “What types of events have you attended?”